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The Cultural, National and Religious Identity of the Inhabitants of the Polish-Belarusian Borderland: Historical Experiences as a Factor in Shaping the Contemporary Podlasie Region

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The Cultural, National and Religious Identity of the Inhabitants of the Polish-Belarusian Borderland: Historical Experiences as a Factor in Shaping the Contemporary Podlasie Region

Keywords: cultural identity, national identity, religious identity, Podlasie

1. Introduction

People living in areas along the contemporary border between Poland and Belarus differ in terms of their religious, cultural and ethnic affiliation. Poles and Belarusians, that is Catholics and members of the Orthodox Church, live on both sides of the border together. Difficult historical experiences have influenced the contemporary relations between these two communities. On the one hand, there is much mutual distrust between the two communities (especially among the older generation); while on the other hand, mutual prejudices and stereotypes are becoming increasingly less prevalent among the younger part of the population of the borderland Podlasie region. This change is manifested in, for example, the growing number of mixed marriages which were rare several decades ago or which were even considered unthinkable in some communities.

This article is aimed to present the specific character of religious and ethnic relations in areas along the border between Poland and Belarus based on the example of Podlasie which — within today's borders —

is a frontier encompassing a large part of north-eastern Poland, the Masuria on the north and west, the Mazovia on the west, and the Lublin Polesie region on the south. Nowadays, Drohiczyn, a historic capital of Podlasie, is a very small town (with a population of slightly over 2,000) as a result of many historical tragedies, wars and acts of destruction. In administrative terms, the part of Podlasie located within the borders of the Republic of Poland today belongs to the territory of three provinces: the Podlasie Province, the Mazovia Province and the Lublin Province. The lack of administrative structure encompassing the whole region is a reflection of historical events. At the same time, however, it weakens the region's position nationally by blurring its specificity and the role it has played in the Polish history.

This article outlines the history of ethnic and religious relations in the Podlasie region in the context of changing historical circumstances, and it presents the contemporary state of these relations as well as prospects related to identity changes taking place in Polish society.

2. Podlasie — a multi-religious and multi-ethnic region

The name of this region, which has been a borderland between Poland and Belarus since the end of the Second World War, expresses its historical, religious and ethnic character. Contemporary Polish language users are not aware of the etymology of the name Podlasie, and they mistakenly trace its origin to the word *las*, that is 'forest', as they think it denotes land 'covered by forests' or lying *pod*, that is 'under', forests. However, from the linguistic perspective, such an explanation of the name's origin is completely unjustified. In fact, the original Old Ruthenian name *Podlasze* (*Podlaszszze*) described land *pod Lachami*, that is 'under Poles', which means the borderland between Poland and Rus' that was colonised by Polish settlers coming from eastern Mazovia. The Polonisation of the Old Ruthenian term has led to the development of its today's form. Nonetheless, the coexistence of people differing in terms of language, ethnicity and religion, which has lasted since the medieval colonisation of the Podlasie primeval forest, is still reflected in this name.¹

¹ *Sokołów Podlaski. Dzieje miasta i okolic*. Ed. G. RYŻEWSKI. Białystok—Sokołów Podlaski 2006, p. 45; A. JABŁONOWSKI: *Polska XVI wieku pod względem geograficzno-statystycznym*. Warszawa 1909, p. 1.

2.1. The First Republic (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) — the period of peaceful coexistence

Conflicts between Poland and Rus' from the medieval period, that is when Podlasie really was a borderland, ended completely as the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (where, despite the name, most of the population were Ruthenians) formed subsequent unions, which led to the creation of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Commonwealth. However, as Poles, who were connected with the Catholic Church, had cultural primacy in this vast country, there were also certain inequalities regarding relations between particular ethnic and religious groups in the Commonwealth starting from the 16th century. The dominance of Polish and Catholic culture in the First Republic caused the cultural deprivation of the Ruthenian people, who were connected with the Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Metropolitanate. This cultural disadvantage manifested itself in the poverty of Ruthenian material and artistic culture and in the secondary role of the Ruthenian language, which was virtually absent from the public life. These inequalities, which heralded later conflicts in the area of Podlasie, caused many representatives of the Ruthenian elites to become Polonised in terms of Polish language and culture, that were very common among them, and religion, which was manifested in relatively numerous conversions to Catholicism.

Another manifestation of taking a moderate path was the establishment of the Uniate Church, that is a Church which was united with Rome but retained Eastern Christian tradition and rite. This Church, originating from the creation of the Union of Brest in 1596, became the main community protecting Ruthenian culture and language in the Commonwealth although it did not manage to avoid certain Latinising tendencies. The Union of Brest was very successful in the Podlasie region and, thus, the religious differences between Poles and Ruthenians (Belarusians) inhabiting those lands disappeared almost completely in the last period of the Commonwealth.²

It is necessary that attention be drawn to a fact which is often passed over in silence in the contemporary ecumenical discourse — the Union of Brest, which was to unite the Catholic Church with the Orthodox Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was formed on the initiative of Orthodox bishops who feared Moscow's growing power and, conse-

² E. BESZTA-BOROWSKI: *Dzieje parafii katolickiej Narodzenia NMP i św. Mikołaja w Bielsku Podlaskim*. Ed. M. SKŁADANOWSKI. Drohiczyn 2012, p. 206.

quently, of the Archdiocese of Kiev becoming dependent on the Russian Orthodox Church, which was gaining increased significance. By creating the Union of Brest, Orthodox bishops in the Commonwealth wanted to clearly dissociate themselves from Moscow and emphasise the importance and historical status of the Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Metropolitanate. It is precisely because the Union of Brest was in fact a manifestation of the Orthodox Church's independence from Moscow in the Commonwealth that Russian policy after the partitions of Poland was directed with particular force against the union.

2.2. The historical and political origins of contemporary conflicts

The Podlasie region experienced the mentioned religious and ethnic policy of Russia in the 19th century. As a result of a formal division of this territory into two parts: the western part which belonged to the Kingdom of Poland (actually controlled by Russia) and the eastern part which became directly incorporated into Russia, the activities of this partitioning power varied in form over time.³ However, as for the dimension of the ethnic policy which is outlined in this article, the objectives of these activities were always the same. First, Russians aimed to Russify Ruthenian (Belarusian) people, who belonged to the Uniate Church, to the largest extent possible and to strengthen the antagonisms between these people and Poles, who belonged to the Latin Catholic Church. Secondly, the aim of Russian policy was to put an end to the Uniate Church and completely Russify the Orthodox Church in the territory of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁴ Thirdly, various activities were carried out which were directed against Polish culture and the Latin Church which was identified with this culture. The history of Podlasie in the 19th century shows that the objectives of Russian cultural and religious policy were met with considerable resistance. Resistance from Poles mostly manifested itself in uprisings — the November Uprising (1830—1831) and the January Uprising (1863—1865). Ruthenians expressed their resistance through numerous acts of defending the Uniate Church performed both

³ Ibidem, p. 116

⁴ J. MAROSZEK: "Dziedzictwo unii kościelnej w krajobrazie kulturowym Podlasia 1596—1996." In: *Czterechsetlecie zawarcia Unii Brzeskiej 1596—1996*. Eds. S. ALEKSANDROWICZ, T. KEMPA. Toruń 1998, pp. 78—80.

by the clergy and the laity who did not agree to become forcibly incorporated into the Orthodox Church.

Although there were many manifestations of the sometimes heroic resistance from people living in Podlasie,⁵ it should be noted that the balance of the cultural and religious policy which was implemented by Russian invaders and which was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 shows that it was effective as far as its main objectives are concerned. Belarusians living in the area of Podlasie became strongly Russified. Although they retained their local language (not the modern Belarusian language, which, to a large extent, is a result of the work carried out by Belarusian national activists at the turn of the 20th century that, in fact, is not used in speech) and traditions that were distinct from Russian customs, Belarusian people largely lost their sense of being separate from Russians in terms of culture as well as their own cultural heritage, which had its origins in the historic capital of Rus' and the original centre of Ruthenian Christianity — Kiev. In accordance with the plans of the Russian occupation authorities, the Uniate Church in Podlasie became completely destroyed⁶ (it only survived in areas that were controlled by Austria-Hungary before the First World War), and the Orthodox Church in the territory of the former Polish Republic became fully subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church. (As a result of this subordination, even the efforts made by the government of the Second Polish Republic (1918—1939) that were aimed to gain autocephaly for the Polish Orthodox Church, granted by the Patriarch of Constantinople, turned out to be ineffective as, in the realities of the communist rule, it had to be granted again by the Patriarch of Moscow in 1948).⁷ Finally, after Poland regained independence in 1918, it became clear how big the scale of destruction of the Latin Church in Podlasie was — especially in material terms — during the period of Russian persecution. The awareness of this fact fuelled ethnic and religious antagonisms created by Russians as Poles who lived in Podlasie regarded Belarusian Orthodox people not only as successors to Russian invaders but also the main beneficiaries of their anti-Polish policy (the tsarist government handed over the lands and property that had been seized from the Catholic Church to the Orthodox Church as a part of repressive activities undertaken after subsequent uprisings aimed to regain independence).

⁵ E. LIKOWSKI: *Dzieje Kościoła Unickiego na Litwie i Rusi w XVIII i XIX wieku*. Warszawa 1906, p. 101; E. BESZTA-BOROWSKI: *Dzieje parafii katolickiej Narodzenia NMP i św. Mikołaja w Bielsku Podlaskim...*, pp. 210—216.

⁶ W. KŁOBUK: "Trzy kasaty unii kościelnej: 1795, 1839, 1875 — różnice i podobieństwa." *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL* 34 (1991) 1—2, pp. 3—5.

⁷ M. KRZYSZTOFIŃSKI, K. SYCHOWICZ: "W kręgu 'Bizancjum'." *Aparat represji w Polsce Ludowej 1944—1989* 1(6) (2008), p. 82.

Although the Second Polish Republic was affected by ethnic and religious conflicts, these were mostly centred in the areas of Volhynia and Podolia, that is the western part of contemporary Ukraine.⁸ Such conflicts often turned into armed clashes and disputes that were resolved by force by Polish law enforcement bodies. Meanwhile, in Podlasie there were almost no such incidents because the national consciousness of Belarusian people living there was relatively weak. And while Ukrainian nationalism was able to develop throughout the 19th century in areas of western Ukraine (Galicia) which was controlled by Austria-Hungary, Russification policy that was implemented by the tsarist authorities impeded any manifestations of national and cultural emancipation of Belarusians and Ukrainians living in the Russian Empire. For this reason neither Podlasie nor eastern Ukraine, which was part of the USSR during the interwar period, displayed strong nationalistic tendencies; also, they did not witness a development of large-scale social movements for the revival of Belarusian and Ukrainian national cultures. (This problem reverberates in the contemporary political and cultural situation in Ukraine and Belarus. As for Ukraine, there is a strong division into western regions, where the Ukrainian language and active nationalist tendencies prevail, and eastern regions, which are heavily Russified. As regards Belarusians, they have been really strongly Russified — it has even gone so far that the Belarusian language and symbols of Belarusian cultural and national separateness have been almost completely eliminated from the public life).

Serious conflicts between Polish and Belarusian people in Podlasie arose when the Second World War broke out and when eastern parts of the Second Polish Republic were invaded by the Red Army which, under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, crossed the Polish border on 17 September 1939.⁹ Belarusians living in the occupied territories showed support for the invading occupation forces. Additionally, both under the Russian (1939—1941) and German occupation following the German attack on the Soviet Union (1941—1944), Belarusian people sometimes fought with Polish partisans.

After the Second World War ended, much of the eastern parts of the Second Polish Republic became incorporated into the USSR. Most of the region of Podlasie (except for the areas of Brest and Grodno) remained

⁸ After the Polish-Bolshevik War, the lands of today's Ukraine were divided between the Second Polish Republic and Soviet Ukraine under the Treaty of Riga in 1921; Soviet Ukraine became incorporated into the USSR in the following year.

⁹ K. KRAJEWSKI, T. ŁABUSZEWSKI: "Łupaszka", "Młot", "Huzar". *Działalność 5 i 6 Brygady Wileńskiej AK (1944—1952)*. Warszawa 2002, pp. 261—262; K. PODLASKI: *Białorusini, Litwini, Ukraińcy*. Białystok 1990, p. 26.

within Polish borders. Thus, Podlasie once again became a borderland. The ethnic and religious antagonisms that were created by Russian invaders in the 19th century, which especially made themselves felt during the Second World War, were used for the purpose of internal policy by the Polish communist authorities.¹⁰ In order to antagonise the region's inhabitants and reduce the importance of the Catholic Church, which was the only social force that retained real independence, the authorities favoured the activity of the Orthodox Church in Podlasie by means of various administrative decisions and gained loyalty from Orthodox hierarchs in return (for example, the Orthodox Church openly supported the martial law declared by General Wojciech Jaruzelski on 13 December 1981 that was aimed at suppressing the Solidarity movement, which had strong ties with the Catholic Church).¹¹ At the same time, the Polish communist authorities, in accordance with the guidelines given by Moscow, firmly opposed to any forms of revival of Belarusian national culture in Podlasie (attempts to revive Ukrainian culture met with similar opposition in the south-eastern part of Poland), which could, in their opinion, negatively influence the relations between Poland and Soviet Russia as well as disturb the image of post-war Poland as an ethnically uniform state. In this way communist policy directed towards people living in Podlasie, on the one hand, antagonised Catholics and members of the Orthodox Church and, on the other hand, reduced the possibility of the development of Belarusian culture and national consciousness.

3. Contemporary ethnic and religious relations

The historical experiences that are outlined in this article, in particular the cultural and religious policy implemented by Russian invaders in the 19th century, as well as the activity of the communist authorities towards the inhabitants of Podlasie, which was in a way a continuation of this policy, have led to the development of the today's ethnic and religious situation in this peculiar region of Poland.

¹⁰ M. KRZYSZTOFIŃSKI, K. SYCHOWICZ: "W kręgu 'Bizancjum'..." pp. 86—87, 103.

¹¹ K. PODLASKI: *Białorusini, Litwini, Ukraińcy*. Białystok 1990, pp. 22—23; M. KRZYSZTOFIŃSKI, K. SYCHOWICZ: "W kręgu 'Bizancjum'..." pp. 84—85.

3.1. The main characteristics of contemporary ethnic and religious relations

Since the democratic changes in 1989, people living in Podlasie, similarly to the whole Polish society, have been enjoying the freedom of religion and the freedom to express their own ethnic background. Transformations related to the collapse of the communist regime have led to the development of church institutions and organisations that uphold national traditions in Podlasie.

As far as religion is concerned, it should be noted that both Catholic and Orthodox structures have developed considerably in the Podlasie region. As for the Orthodox Church, such church structures as Bractwo Młodzieży Prawosławnej (The Fellowship of Orthodox Youth) or Fundacja im. Księcia Konstantego Ostrońskiego (Prince Konstanty Ostroński's Foundation) also often have a national character. After the fall of communism in Poland, the Orthodox Church started to strongly emphasise its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church and its connection with national minorities, in particular the Belarusian and Ukrainian minorities, which is not only manifested in religion but also in culture.

The Polish state's policy after 1989, which was favourable towards national minorities, made it possible to develop Belarusian education as well as social and cultural organisations in Podlasie. Road signs with bilingual place names near Hajnówka, where Orthodox Belarusians constitute a vast majority, are a characteristic symbol of Belarusian activity in this area.¹² (It is a kind of paradox that road signs bear inscriptions in both Polish and Belarusian while local people do not really use the Belarusian language, somewhat artificially created by Belarusian national activists at the turn of the 20th century, but they speak a local language, which sometimes differs from place to place. It seems that these bilingual road signs are not so much a means of conveying information as a reflection of efforts to strengthen and manifest Belarusian national identity, which is also symbolised by a language, even if it is not used in practice).

¹² "Podlaskie. Dwujęzyczne tablice z nazwami miejscowości w gminie Orla". Available at: http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1,114873,10359051,Podlaskie__Dwujezyczne_tablice_z_nazwami_miejscowosci.html (accessed 10.11.2013).

3.2. Changes in the identity of the contemporary society of the Podlasie region

The revival of the religious and cultural activity of Orthodox Belarusians in Podlasie is accompanied by other phenomena that are characteristic of the whole contemporary Polish society. Social changes intensify the secularisation process, weaken the position of religious institutions and reduce the importance of the sense of ethnic and religious belonging. Material goods and the lifestyle that is typical of the Western world are becoming much more important for today's young generation of Poles compared to their attachment to a religious or national community. For this reason also the negative experiences of the past are losing their importance; such experiences used to fuel antagonisms between Polish and Belarusian inhabitants of Podlasie for many decades.

As for religion, these tendencies are reflected, apart from the widespread weakening of religiousness, in an increasing number of religiously mixed marriages which are entered into both in the Catholic and the Orthodox Church. While in the middle of the 19th century such marriages were still a rarity due to a high degree of social separation and mutual distrust between the Catholic and Orthodox populations, nowadays religious affiliation is becoming increasingly less important for young people who intend to get married. This redefinition of values has also made both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church liberalise their pastoral and canonical practice related to marriages.¹³

In the context of Polish culture, attention should be paid to another factor in the transformation of religious relations — in terms of religion Podlasie is a unique region because of the considerable significance of the Orthodox Church (still being a minority church, though), which is almost non-existent in other parts of the country. As Podlasie is one of the least economically developed regions of Poland, many young people are leaving this area in pursuit of better educational and employment opportunities. For young members of the Orthodox Church, breaking out of one's own ethnic and church community often means cutting almost all ties with tradition and religious practice, which represents a serious challenge to the contemporary Polish Orthodox Church.

¹³ M. SKŁADANOWSKI: "Małżeństwa mieszane wyznaniowo — ekumeniczna szansa i życiowe problemy. Perspektywa teologiczna i duszpasterska." *Studia nad Rodziną* 15 (2011) 1—2, p. 58; S. ULACZYK: "Zespół bilateralny katolicko-prawosławny. Spojrzenie historyczne z nutą optymizmu na przyszłość." In: *Ekumenizm w posoborowym półwiczcu. Sukcesy i trudności katolickiego zaangażowania na rzecz jedności chrześcijan*. Eds. M. SKŁADANOWSKI, T. SZCZEWSKI. Lublin 2013, p. 53.

As for ethnicity, apart from the above-mentioned activity of social and cultural minority organisations, one can observe an increasing Polonisation of the young generation of Podlasie's inhabitants of Belarusian descent, which manifests itself in that the local language is almost never used at home, whereas Polish is a dominant language, and the young generation wants it to become introduced to both pastoral and liturgical practice in the Orthodox Church. As is the case with other minority groups in Poland, national traditions are becoming reduced to certain elements of folklore in the public mind and, at the same time, they have almost completely disappeared from the daily lives of families and local communities.

4. Prospects

In conclusion, a hypothesis can be formed that the prospects for the development of identity among people living in the Podlasie region might be influenced by two opposing factors: (1) the activity of the Orthodox Church which — despite some tendencies towards its Polonisation that are noticeable in diaspora communities outside Podlasie — emphasises its connection with Belarusian national minority; and (2) the intensifying social changes which lead to the disappearance of Podlasie's cultural separateness from other parts of Poland.

As for the first factor, it should be noted that the Orthodox Church consciously chose to identify with minority groups after 1989, thus aiming to gain social support for its activity from the Belarusian and Ukrainian national movements. This path, however, has a serious disadvantage: it fosters Polish society's beliefs that the Orthodox Church is identified with otherness or even that it is the enemy of "Polishness." For example, it is worthwhile to mention the controversial event of 2013 — the Orthodox Church, based on an agreement concluded with the Polish government, demanded to be given land located in Drohiczyn, which had been taken away from the Catholic Church by the tsarist authorities and handed over to the Orthodox Church as part of persecutions after the January Uprising (1863). The fact that the 150th anniversary of this uprising fell in 2013 has caused a stir in society. It is in this context that the Orthodox Church is putting herself in the role of a successor as well as the main beneficiary of Russian persecution of Poles by demanding to be given property which was taken away from Polish people by the Russian invader, even though it emphasises its independence from Moscow on

different occasions.¹⁴ Therefore, one might think that the activities of the Orthodox Church that are aimed to strengthen ties with Belarusian people in Podlasie contribute to the deepening of the social and cultural isolation of the Orthodox faith and — in a long-term perspective — might be destructive for this Church.

As for the second of the above-mentioned factors, it must be stated that the religious and national factor is becoming considerably less significant in the life of the region's inhabitants both as a result of the emigration of young people from Podlasie and as a consequence of modernisation processes. This is accompanied by the disappearance of historical consciousness which manifests itself in the lack of knowledge about significant events in the history of the region and the lack of a sense of its separateness from the other regions of Poland. There is certainly a positive side of this trend — the memory of events which used to be a source of ethnic and religious conflicts in the past is disappearing. At the same time, however, the cultural and religious diversity in Podlasie is also disappearing; within today's Polish borders Podlasie is a region with a unique tradition of multiculturalism which can boast the fact that both Poles and Ruthenians, Catholics and members of the Orthodox Church, as well as Latin Catholics and members of the Uniate Church coexisted there in peace for many centuries until the period of the partitions. The disappearance of historical consciousness makes it impossible for Podlasie's past — both the period of peace and that of conflicts — to still be a point of reference for building contemporary civil society, which is to be based on mutual tolerance and respect for all the inhabitants of this land.

¹⁴ *Dobra kościelne w Drohiczynie na przestrzeni wieków a współczesne prawa własności*. Available at: <http://www.drohiczynska.pl/?action=news&id=1688> (accessed 10.11.2013).

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of the Polish-Belarusian Borderland:
Historical Experiences as a Factor in Shaping the Contemporary
Podlasie Region

Summary

This article is aimed to present the specific character of religious and ethnic relations in areas along the border between Poland and Belarus based on the example of Podlasie region. The article outlines the history of ethnic and religious relations in the Podlasie region in the context of changing historical circumstances and it presents the contemporary state of these relations as well as prospects related to identity changes taking place in Polish society.

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Identité culturelle, nationale et religieuse des habitants
de la région frontalière entre la Pologne et la Biélorussie.
Experiences historiques en tant que facteur formant
la Podlachie contemporaine

Résumé

L'objectif de l'article est de présenter le caractère particulier des relations religieuses et ethniques dans la région frontalière entre la Pologne et la Biélorussie à l'exemple de la Podlachie. Le texte décrit l'histoire des relations ethniques et religieuses en Podlachie dans le contexte des circonstances historiques changeantes, et il présente l'état contemporain de ces relations ainsi que les perspectives liées aux changements identitaires qui se produisent dans la société polonaise.

Mots clés: identité culturelle, identité nationale, identité religieuse, Podlachie

MARCIN SKŁADANOWSKI

L'identità culturale, nazionale e religiosa degli abitanti
della zona di confine polacco-bielorussa.
Le esperienze storiche come fattore nella formazione
della regione contemporanea della Podlachia

Sommario

L'articolo ha lo scopo di presentare la natura particolare delle relazioni religiose ed etniche nei territori della zona di confine polacco-bielorussa sull'esempio della regione

della Podlachia. Il testo presenta la storia delle relazioni etniche e religiose nella Podlachia, nel contesto delle circostanze storiche che cambiano, e presenta la situazione contemporanea di tali relazioni come pure le prospettive legate ai cambiamenti di identità in corso nella società polacca.

Parole chiave: identità culturale, identità nazionale, identità religiosa, Podlachia