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**CONTEMPORARY NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSIFICATION OF  
INHABITANTS OF THE POLISH-BELORUSSIAN BORDERLAND  
– THE CASE OF THE HAJNÓWKA DISTRICT**

Borderland is a transit area between two or more states or nations. It usually arises as a result of various historical changes in political status of a given territory, mingling of population, and interfering political influences. The main factors responsible for diversity of borderlands are migration and settlement processes stemming from political and economic changes (Babiński 1994, 1997, Kantor 1989, Koter 1995, 1997, Sadowski 1991, 1995).

An important type of borderlands are ethnic borderlands that is contact zones of two or more ethnic groups. Nations, however, are internally diversified in respect of self-identity. Moreover, the processes of integration and assimilation eliminate ethnic differences. Therefore a borderland exists first of all in the consciousness of the inhabitants. There are some areas where even a part of a village or town lying beyond a river is labelled for instance Russian, Polish, or German.

A peculiar situation arises in ethnic borderlands within the territory of a third party, for example the borderland between Belorussian and Ukrainian population in Poland. Most often though borderlands have no definite boundaries, even in the public consciousness. This is one of reasons of conflicts in ethnic borderlands (Babiński 1994, Sadowski 1991, 1995).

One of vital aspects of borderland is its social dimension. Different ethnic groups inhabiting a borderland have different social status due to the territorial expansion and settlement of the dominating people. The social, cultural and economic gap between indigenous and allochthonous population was usually very large and could tend to widen. Such was the case in the eastern

borderland of Poland as well as in Polish-German borderland. Social differences were aggravated by the character of settlement for the rural dwellers were inferior in all respects to those living in towns (Babiński 1997). Moreover, most newcomers settle in urban settings whereas the rural population is autochthonous. The coexistence of both groups is hardly ever based on equal rights. Usually the group which is culturally and economically more advanced forces its own culture upon indigenous peoples (Chlebowczyk 1983).

Of particular importance here is the cultural dimension of borderland. In such area different cultural elements penetrate reciprocally, interfere, evolve and contribute to the diversity of border population (Chlebowczyk 1983, Babiński 1997, Rembowska 1998). That is how a specific frontier culture comes into being.

Polish-Belorussian borderland is the most diversified region in Poland in respect of nationality, culture and religion. It forms both an interstate borderland between Poland and Belarus and an internal ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic borderland. Prevailing nations are Poles and Belorussians but the presence of Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Tatars, Romanies, Armenians, Russians, and Karaites makes of the region a maze of nations.

The investigation carried out in the town of Hajnówka and in rural areas of the Hajnówka District supplied data on the ethnic, linguistic and religious structure of inhabitants of the region concerned.

The survey was made in July 1999 and covered the town of Hajnówka and five communes in the Hajnówka District: Czeremcha, Czyże, Dubicze Cerkiewne, Hajnówka and Kleszczele. Among 592 respondents there were 241 inhabitants of the town of Hajnówka and 351 rural residents. The sample closely represented the total population of the area.

The results of the questionnaire were immensely varied depending on the place of residence.

Although both in the town and rural areas declarations of Polish national affiliation prevailed (tab. 1), nevertheless in the countryside those declaring Polish nationality were only 37% whereas in Hajnówka over 65%. The difference results from larger share of Belorussians among rural population and the settlement of allochthonous Poles mainly in towns. In addition, the process of Polonization is more intense in urban communities than in the country.

TABLE 1. Ethnic structure of the area concerned (in %)

Ethnic groups	Town of Hajnówka	Hajnówka District
Poles	66	37
Belorussians	19	27
Ukrainians	1	2
Local inhabitants	14	32
Others	0	2

Source: author's researches

It is highly significant that a third of rural respondents label themselves “local inhabitants” thus avoiding an open declaration of nationality. In the town such an answer is very rare. It may stem from a repugnance to reveal one's national affiliation or an underdeveloped ethnic identity among countrymen. It can be also explained in terms of strong sense of belonging to a territory.

Though only a small percent of respondents declared Ukrainian nationality, it indicates that Ukrainian identity develops among Orthodox population of the region based on a distinct language, culture and origin (Sadowski 1995, 1997). This is a relatively new process so those claiming Ukrainian identity represent a small proportion of the respondents.

TABLE 2. Linguistic structure of the area concerned (in %)

Mother tongues	Town of Hajnówka	Hajnówka District
Polish	76	39
Belorussian	12	24
Ukrainian	0,5	4
Russian	0,5	1
Local dialect	11	32

Source: author's researches

A comparison of ethnic (tab. 1) and linguistic (tab. 2) structure of the respondents leads to some interesting conclusions. In the country the percentage of those declaring Ukrainian as the mother tongue was almost twice as high as those admitting Ukrainian nationality. It gives substance to the hypothesis suggesting that Ukrainian identity is based mainly on the distinct language. In fact, it was found that north-Ukrainian dialects are spoken in eastern and south-eastern part of the Podlasie region (Sadowski 1995).

It is also typical that a third of rural respondents claim the local dialect their mother tongue. In the region of Podlasie different dialects of Polish, Belorussian, Ukrainian and Russian have coexisted and mingled for centuries. A significant part of the population – particularly in the country – is aware of speaking a language that is neither Polish nor Belorussian. It is a transitional dialect related rather to eastern Slavonic languages (Belorussian, Ukrainian, Russian) than to Polish. Most respondents indicating the dialect as their mother tongue were Belorussian or “local inhabitants” (tab. 3).

Almost all Polish respondents, obviously enough, declare Polish as their mother tongue. Polish is also a native language for a considerable number of “local inhabitants”, Ukrainians and 20% of Belorussians, especially in towns (tab. 3). From this, it appears that the language assimilation proceeds faster than the absorption of minorities into Polish nation. It stems from a domination of Polish as the only official language used in the media, education and in everyday life.

TABLE 3. Mother tongue of main ethnic groups in the Hajnówka District

Ethnic groups	Mother tongues (%)				
	Polish	Belorussian	Ukrainian	Local dialect	Others
Poles	80	7	0,5	12	0,5
Belorussians	20	43	1	35	1
Ukrainians	39	0	46	15	0
Local inhabitants	41	24	3	31	1

Source: author’s researches

Of fundamental importance for ethnic and cultural relations in borderlands is the question of religion. Very often it is a main factor of national differentiation and a basic criterion of belonging to an ethnic group. When ethnic divisions correspond closely to the religious ones it is much easier for minorities to preserve their distinct national identity (for instance Poles and Belorussians). Otherwise, when two groups share the same religion, it is very likely that, sooner or later, both cultures converge and differences between particular peoples fade away. As a rule, border people put a premium on religion as an element helping in preservation of national values (Sadowski 1995, 1997).

The area concerned is the most diversified region in Poland in respect of religion<sup>1</sup>. There are very little areas in Poland where the Roman Catholicism is not prevalent. However such is the case of the communes in question which are predominantly Orthodox, in particular in rural areas (tab. 4).

TABLE 4. Religious structure of the area concerned (in %)

Religions	Town of Hajnówka	Hajnówka District
Orthodox	51	82
Roman Catholics	45	16
Others	1	1
Atheists	2	1
No answer	1	0

Source: author's researches

Commitment to a particular religion determines very often, in popular opinion, one's nationality. Deep-rooted stereotype invariably associates Polish with the Catholicism and Belorussian with the Orthodox Church. However, if indeed an overwhelming majority of Catholics declare Polish nationality, it could not be stated that all Orthodox are Belorussian. A confrontation of the national and religious declarations (tab. 5) shows that among Orthodox

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<sup>1</sup> The former Białystok Voivodship (which includes the Hajnowka District) is marked by the highest proportion of religious minorities in Poland – 37% (Sadowski A., 1997)

respondents there are a large number of Poles. It was found that almost a half of Polish respondents are Orthodox. On the other hand among the Roman Catholics there are some “local inhabitants”, although they form rather small proportion. The inconformity of ethnic and denominational data in the area concerned shows that the stereotypical division between Catholic Poles and Orthodox Belorussians does not correspond to the facts. It seems significant that those who avoid an open national declaration by naming themselves “local inhabitants” are predominantly Orthodox.

TABLE 5. Religious affiliation of main ethnic groups in the Hajnówka District

Ethnic groups	Religions (%)		
	Orthodox	Roman Catholics	Others
Poles	46	51	3
Belorussians	99	1	0
Ukrainians	100	0	0
Local inhabitants	81	15	4

Source: author’s researches

The questionnaire showed place of residence to be a strong factor influencing identity. Rural dwellers greatly differ from urban residents as to the social, economic and professional status. It has a direct impact on declarations concerning national and religious identity. The inhabitants of Hajnówka most often declare Polish nationality, Polish language and Catholicism whereas the respondents from the country are predominantly Orthodox, Belorussian or “local inhabitants”.

The study has come to the conclusion that ethnic divisions not always conform to the linguistic and religious ones. It follows that the stereotyped classifications of population hardly apply to ethnic borderlands where the reality is by far more complicated.

In addition it has showed that at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Central Europe – a very divers region in respect of nationality, culture, and religion – there still exist borderlands where almost a third of the population – due to either indisposition to self-determination or poor sense of ethnic distinctness – classify themselves as ‘local inhabitants’ and declare local dialect as their mother tongue.

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