

THE CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS BORDERLAND IN THE PODLASIE REGION

Podlasie, a historical and geographical region in eastern Poland, has been for centuries a political and national borderland where Polish, Lithuanian, Belorussian and Ukrainian ethnic elements intermingled. This resulted in a very durable ethnic, religious and cultural borderland in Podlasie. It was formed by a number of ethnic and religious communities that inhabited this region since a remote past and influenced each other thus making of the region a maze of nations, religions, languages and cultures. The ethnic and religious diversification of the region was determined by frequent changes in political attachment of Podlasie and several waves of various settlement – a usual phenomenon in the region that was, particularly in the Middle Ages, a kind of frontier of Poland, Lithuania and Russia (Gloger 1903, Makarski 1996, Piskozub 1968, 1987, Ślusarczyk 1995, Wiśniewski 1977).

Ethnic borderland in Podlasie 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 religious mosaic is not so striking, nevertheless it is the only province of Poland where the Roman Catholics are outnumbered by followers of another religion, namely the Orthodox (Chałupczak, Browarek 1998, Sadowski 1991 a, 1995 a, b, 1997).

The national and religious borderland in Podlasie is a zone with many transitory areas where different national, religious, linguistic and cultural groups overlap. There are hardly any clear dividing lines separating particular national and religious groups. In Podlasie various communities, in many cases closely related to each other, coexist side by side.

Zone borderlands are usually extensive areas where ethnic divisions tend to fade away. The whole area of north-eastern Poland, including Podlasie, can be considered as such a zone borderland. Here, several nationalities and religions are separated by more or less vast

transitory belts rather than definite dividing lines. Sometimes such transitory areas gave rise to some new derivative communities (Chlebowczyk 1975, 1983, Koter 1995, 1998, Sadowski 1991a, b, 1995 a, 1997).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the paper seeks to define the areas of domination of particular national and ethnic groups in south-eastern Podlasie and to demarcate national and religious borderlands in the area concerned. This attempt encountered a number of obstacles, some of them being specific for the region of Podlasie¹, such as:

- high degree of national and religious diversification of the region's population and its mobility;
- unconformity of declared nationality with religion and mother tongue stereotypically ascribed to it;
- religious, cultural and linguistic closeness of Belorussian and Ukrainian populations;
- lack of evident natural geographic borders between the communities concerned;
- post-war population shifts resulting from migration to the towns, particularly the East-Slav Orthodox population;
- assimilation and Polonization of the Orthodox population, intensified by post-war migrations, socio-economic advances of rural population and the policy pursued by the communist government toward national minorities;
- a kind of Ruthenization of a small part of Orthodox population causing some controversies and clashes concerning ethnic origin (Belorussian or Ukrainian) of the Orthodox population inhabiting the area between the Narew and Bug rivers;
- big share (20%) of people who avoid a definite national declaration labelling themselves "locals" ("tutejsi"), particularly among the Orthodox.

For lack of official statistical data (at the time of the survey) on national and religious composition of the Podlasie population the borderland was demarcated according to subjective declarations of national and religious identity of the respondents. Sample of 1,500 respondents² was taken from 3 towns and 103 villages situated in 12 communes in south-eastern Podlasie (fig. 1).

¹ For more details see Barwiński M., 2004, 'Podlasie jako pogranicze narodowościowo-wyznaniowe', Łódź

² The questionnaire survey was carried out using the standardised interview method. Sample selection was made by proportional quota method. The proportion 2 interviews per 100 inhabitants was adopted for rural areas and 1 interview per 100 inhabitants for urban areas. Sample closely represented the total population as the age-sex structure is concerned.

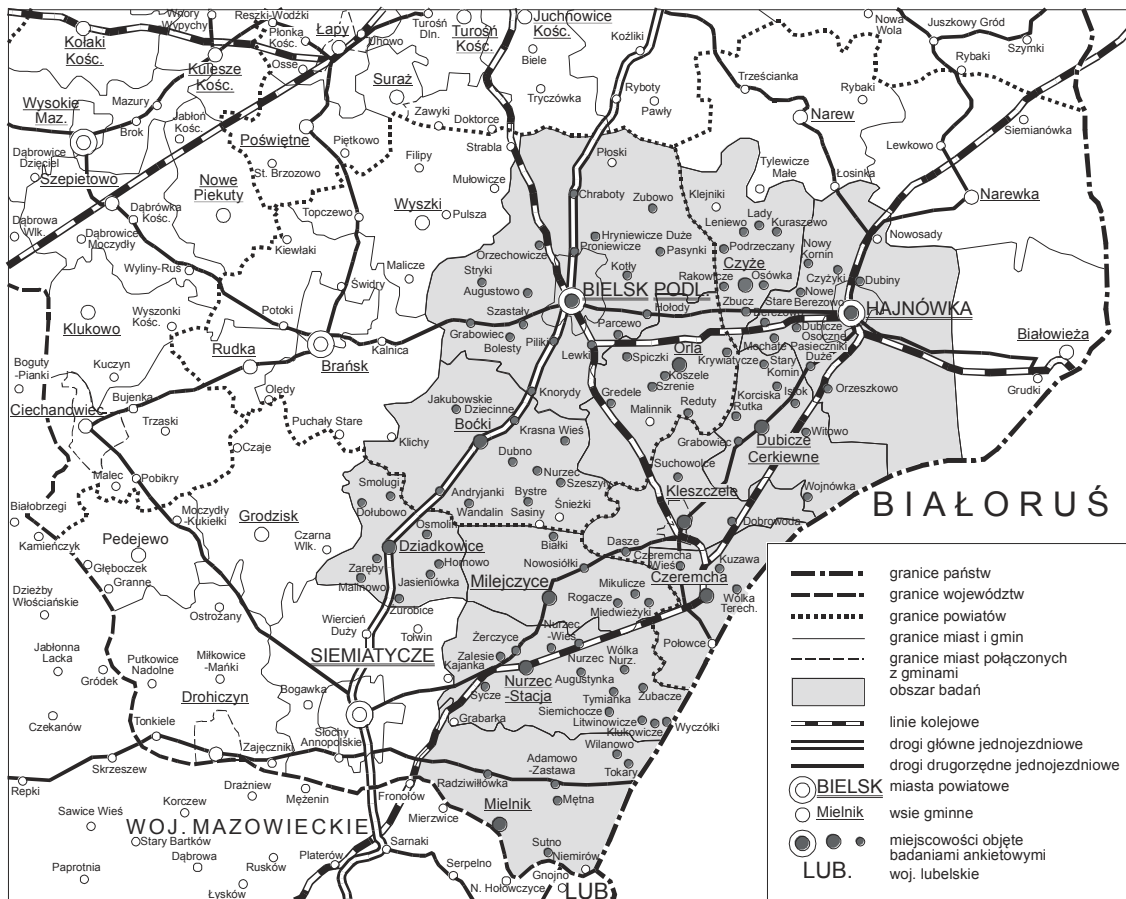


Fig. 1. The research area – localities comprised in the survey

The estimates of national and religious composition of each settlement were based exclusively on respondents' declarations. The next step consisted in spatial interpolation of the results obtained. The graphic representation, performed by the MapInfo Professional programme, portrays geographical distribution of ethnic and religious groups, their share in the total population within given parts of the area concerned, and areas of domination (over 50% share) of particular ethnic and religious groups (fig. 2, 4). This constituted the base for demarcation of borders between dominating religious and ethnic groups (fig. 3, 5).

Naturally, the ethnically and religiously diversified borderland exceeds the extent of the Podlasie region and occurs in whole north-eastern Poland. Delimitation of the 'borderland of domination' refers to a much narrower zone where the share of individual ethnic or religious communities diminishes from over 50% (which means a domination of a given group) to less than a half (which means a domination of another group or non-domination of any group).

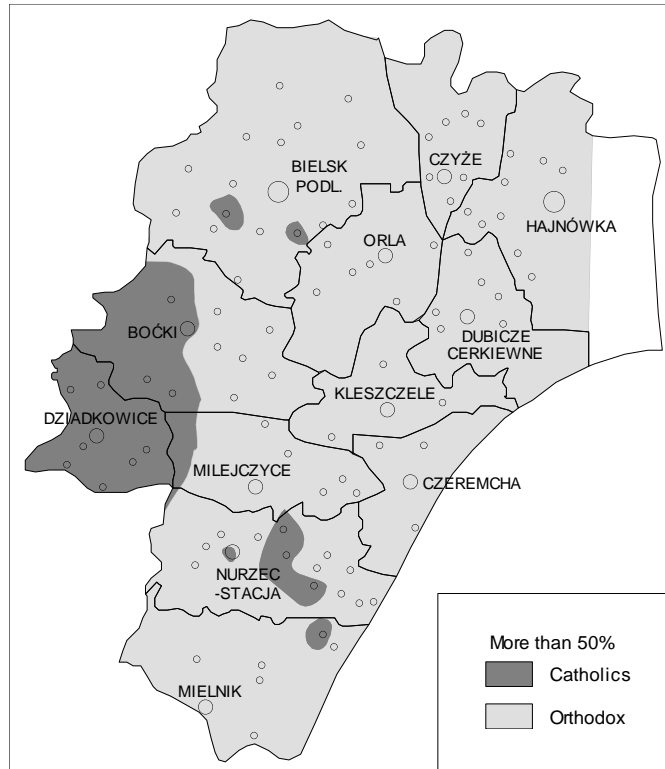


Fig. 2. Areas of religious domination

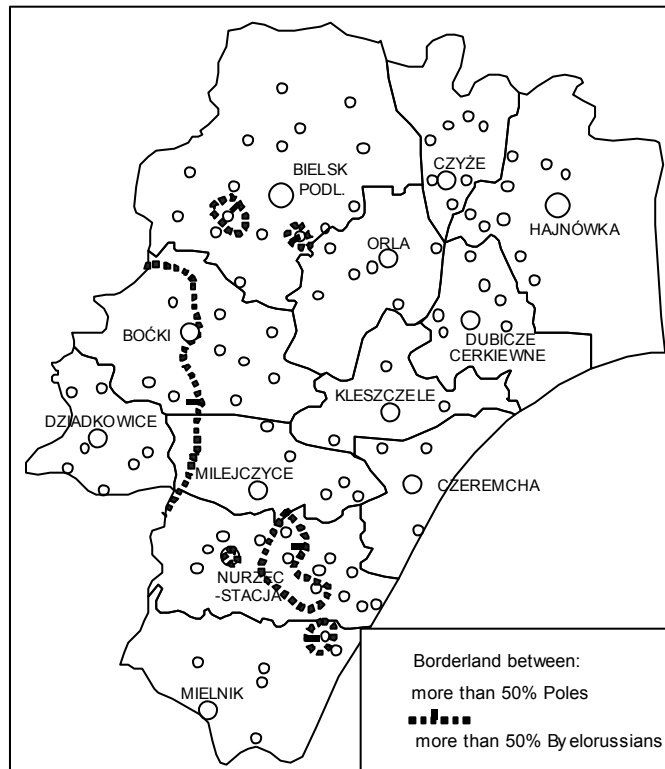


Fig. 3. Geographical position of borderland between the areas of religious domination

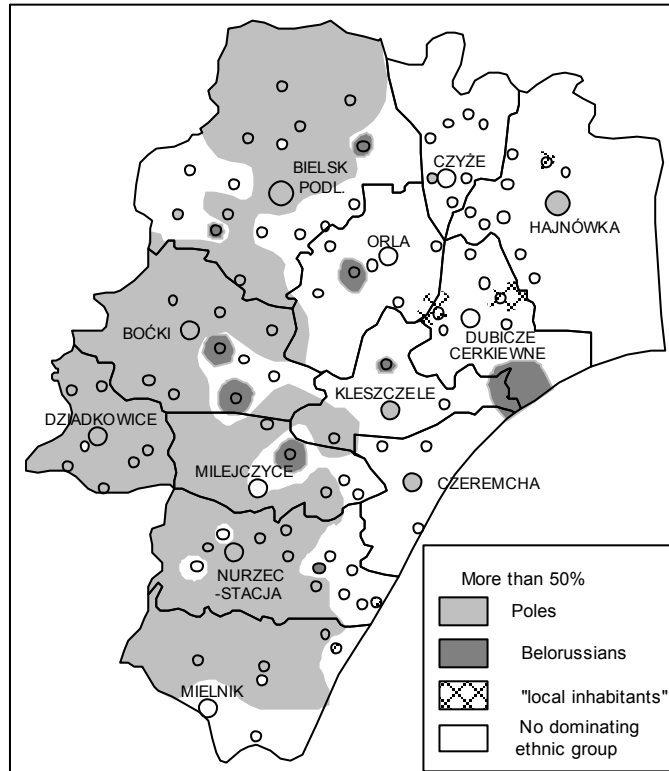


Fig. 4. Areas of ethnic domination

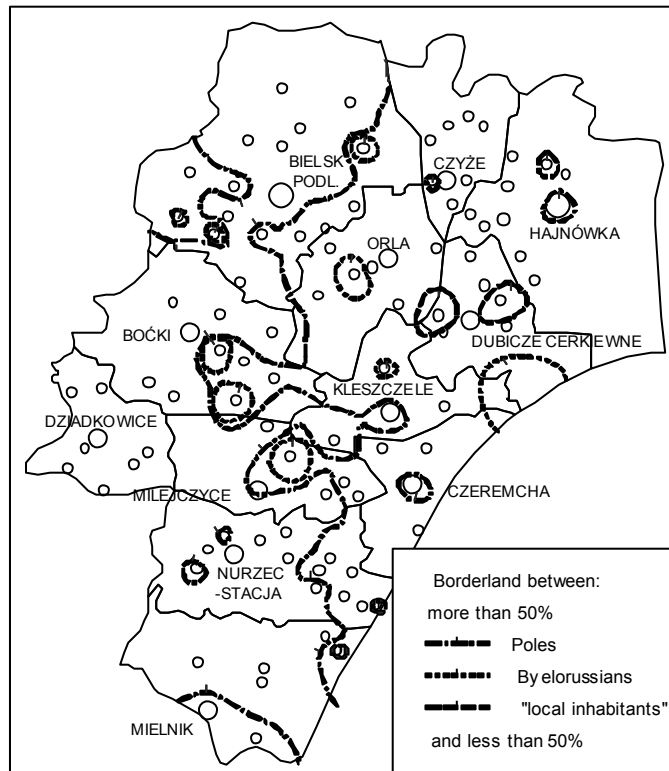


Fig. 5. Geographical position of borderland between the areas of ethnic domination

Geographically and historically, the most striking characteristic of the borderland in question is its amazing stability: during a very long period it changed very little. First contacts between Polish and Ruthenian populations in Podlasie took place in the early Middle Ages, probably near the Nurzec River. Nevertheless a clear division between Catholic Poles and Orthodox Ruthenians formed only in the late 15th century much further eastward, along Drohiczyń-Boćki-Samułki line. This shift was caused by devastating Tatar raids and progressing Polish colonization coming from the west. Obviously, on both sides of this border there were mixed areas. The highest degree of national and religious diversification was typical of towns and their vicinities. Censuses made a few centuries later (in 1897, 1921, and 1931) showed that the ethno-religious division of Podlasie had persisted since the 16th century: the west was inhabited by Catholic Poles whereas the east was predominantly Ruthenian and Orthodox in religion. The border separating them remained almost unchanged since the 15th and 16th centuries, except in the southern part, on the Bug River, it shifted slightly eastward. In the inter-war period this border ran approximately along the line: Siemiatycze-Milejczyce-Boćki-Bielsk-Plutycze. On both sides of this line, however, there were towns and villages inhabited by mixed population, mainly on the eastern side (Goss 2001, Hawryluk 1993, 1999, Krysiński 1928, Makarski 1996, Wakar 1917, Wiśniewski 1977).

Recent researches have shown that at the turn of the 20th century the Catholic-Orthodox borderland remains alive and well in Podlasie without any significant changes over the last 500 years. The division of Podlasie into the predominantly Catholic western part and mostly Orthodox eastern part has existed for a few centuries. It is worth noting that the border still runs more or less along the line: Siemiatycze – Milejczyce – Boćki – Bielsk Podlaski. Moreover the researches have confirmed that in the southern part, on the Bug River, the religious borderland tend to shift eastward. On the eastern Orthodox part of the area concerned relatively the largest share of Catholic population occurs only in towns.

It may be stated that the historical religious diversification of the Podlasie population is still very steady and religious identity – Orthodox and Catholic alike – is definitely the most important element defining their sense of self-identity.

National borderland in Podlasie reaches much further to the east compared to religious borderland (fig. 2, 4). The extents of these two borderlands differ greatly, mainly because many Polish respondents (nearly a half) declares affiliation to the Orthodox Church. This refers particularly to rural areas where ‘Pole-Orthodox’ is the prevailing category declared by the respondents (Barwiński 2004 a, b). This category is mostly made up of Polonized people of Belorussian or Ukrainian background who, in spite of self-identification with Polish nation,

have preserved Orthodox religion, which is not related with Polishness. This results from domination of conservative rural society with relatively large proportion of elderly people who identify themselves by the 'religion of forefathers' rather than language or nationality. Moreover, it should be stressed that differences between the two religions consist not only in theological questions but include some cultural, social and traditional issues. These differences appear even in electoral behaviour as most of the Orthodox – irrespectively of their nationality – vote for the leftist parties. Therefore attachment to the Orthodox community means more than just religious identity; this also has some implications concerning culture, tradition, mentality and specific life style (Kowalski 1998, 2000, Pawluczuk 1999, Sadowski 1995 a).

Some inhabitants of Podlasie, mainly Orthodox, are characterised by changeable national and linguistic identity. It undergoes some changes that consist, in most cases, in assimilation with dominant Polish society. Therefore the contemporary national divisions in Podlasie do not conform to the linguistic and particularly the religious ones (Barwiński 2001 a, b, 2004).

It is clearly visible that the area dominated by Polish nationality is larger than the extent of Roman Catholicism (fig. 2, 4). Predominantly Polish area covers the whole north-western, western and south-western part of the territory in question. Its easternmost extreme is in the southern part where it nearly reaches Polish-Belorussian state border. From this it appears that the respondents who declare themselves as Poles-Orthodox are mostly in central part of the area concerned (fig. 6).

In eastern and north-eastern part of the research area there is no dominant group. Although in some villages Belorussians or 'locals' (tutejsi) as well as Poles are prevailing, mainly in towns, nevertheless in most of the area none national group accounted for more than 50% of respondents (fig. 4). It proves a considerable ethnic diversity of this region. Although none community has an absolute domination, nevertheless the Orthodox population prevails, mainly the 'locals' (tutejsi) and to a lesser extent the Belorussians. The geographical distribution of these two communities is very similar. The main difference consists in a marked correlation between the distribution of Belorussians and the Orthodox. On the areas utterly dominated by the Catholics, especially in western and southern part, the share of Belorussians is quite insignificant.

The proportion of those declaring Ukrainian nationality is negligible. Almost all over the area concerned the Ukrainian national identity does not occur or make up merely a few percent of the total. The questionnaire survey carried out during the research failed to provide

evidence of a clear Polish-Ukrainian or Belorussian-Ukrainian borderlands, although Ukrainians no doubts constitute a component of national composition of Podlasie population.

The region of Podlasie is characterised by national and, more rarely, religious enclaves, particularly in central and north-eastern part. The most ethnically diversified sector is found in the central part of the research area, which has a transitory character (fig. 6).

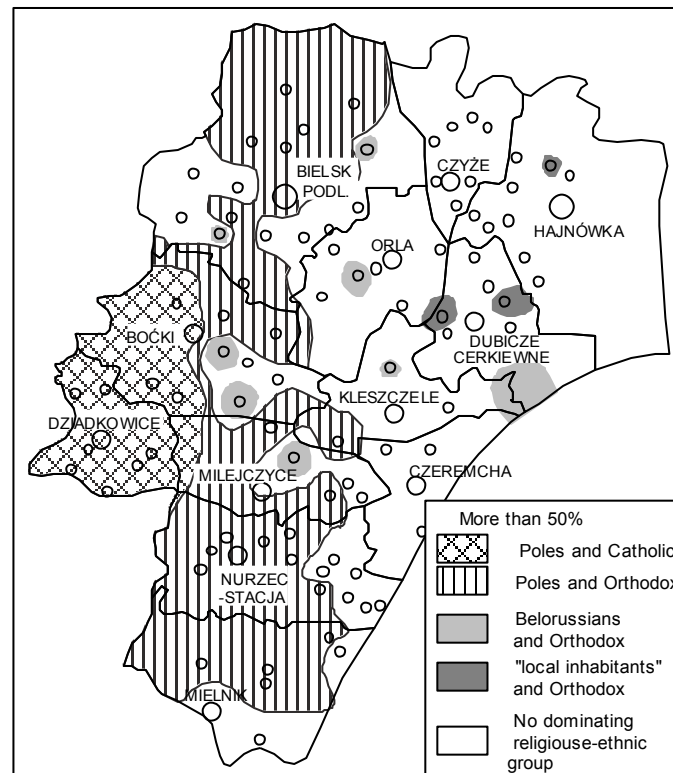


Fig. 6. Areas of religious and ethnic domination

The research has confirmed that the national and religious spatial diversification of Podlasie population with two totally different parts: western and eastern, remained basically unchanged for centuries.

A new tendency, increasingly noticeable especially after WW II, is national borderland shifting eastward faster than the religious one, which results in growing unconformity of the two borderlands. It is explicable in terms of progressing Polonization (in some cases leading to acculturation) of many Orthodox, who, however, preserve their faith. In consequence these days a large part of Polish population in Podlasie declares Orthodox religion. It follows that the predominantly Polish area is more extensive than the area of Catholic domination, which causes divergences between national and religious borderland.

Although the two borderlands are not in line, the analysed part of Podlasie region is evidently divided, both ethnically and religiously, into two parts: the western part dominated by Polish Catholic population and the eastern part dominated by adherents of the Orthodox Church more diversified as to their nationality. The central part is predominantly inhabited by Polish Orthodox population, while in the north-eastern part none of the groups has absolute domination but the communities of 'tutejsi' and Belorussians are most numerous (fig. 6).

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