

PART II

ARTICLES

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BORDERLAND OF NATIONS, RELIGIONS AND CULTURES – THE CASE OF PODLASIE

Abstract. Podlasie, a historical and geographical region in north-eastern Poland, serves as both an external (interstate, European Union) and internal (ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural) borderland. The primary aim of the article is to present historical and political conditions, national and cultural diversification of the Podlasie region, an analysis of current changes in ethnic and religious structure of the inhabitants as well as analysis of the consequences of changes of geopolitical circumstances in mutual relationships between different communities. Borderlands, especially those highly diverse in terms of nationality, religion, language and culture, are often identified with unstable, conflict-prone areas with past and present antagonism between nations sharing them. This belief has intensified over the last few decades when nationalisms, separatist tendencies and historical conflicts got sparked again in numerous regions of Central and Eastern Europe. However, not all European borderlands have to be stereotypically identified with areas of conflict, resentment and even hatred among the peoples inhabiting them. This is the case, among others, in Podlasie, where there are centuries-old traditions of cohabitation of diverse communities.

Key words: Poland, Podlasie, borderland, national minorities, multiculturalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Borderland is the transitory area between two or several nations. It has usually zone character, is socially and culturally diversified, formed as a consequence of the multiple historical changes of the political membership of the given territory, population

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mixing as a result of the settlement processes, intersecting of political and social influences and colliding and penetrating of the varied elements of the culture of neighbouring nations. The essential aspect of borderland is its political dimension, because very often the creation or the transformation of the borderland areas was directly resulting from borders marking or their moving. However there are also borderlands, on the area of which the political borders never existed or appeared very late. Sometimes the borderland is exactly appointed – e.g. between the rivers or range of mountains or is conditioned by the different features of the geographical environment, however most often it can be defined only on the basis of the settlement geography. Its actual area and range is marked by migrations, colonization and cultural differentiation of its occupants (Barwiński, 2004; Koter, 1995, 2003; Sadowski, 1995).

Multi-ethnic areas, typical of the borderlands in Central-Eastern Europe, are usually located at the verge of two or more ethnic ecumenes. They represent a mix of indigenous and immigrant populations of different origins (settlers, colonisers, refugees, displaced populations), sometimes from distant countries, but mostly from neighbouring ones. Immigrant populations generally inhabit such region for generations, with recent immigrants being a rarity. These regions are very diverse internally. They may consist of representatives of several nations, ethnic or cultural groups of different origins, level of social and economic development, as well as political status. These groups may occupy their own little territories or live in dispersion. Their mutual interactions may be peaceful or hostile in character. All multi-ethnic borderlands are dynamic. Their ethnic structure and cultural characteristics vary depending upon a number of factors and demographic, social, economic and political processes (Koter, 2003).

Podlasie is a historical and geographical region located in north-eastern Poland, near the border with Lithuania and Belarus. This region has for centuries served as a political, ethnic, religious and socio-cultural borderland, where Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian ethnoses mixed. This, in turn, determined the development a very persistent religious, linguistic and cultural borderland in Podlasie. It was formed by a number of ethnic and religious communities living in this area for centuries, mutually penetrating and strongly interacting with each other and forming – both in the past and today – a real ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural mosaic.

Over the years, Podlasie was, in sequence, part of Ruthenia, Lithuania, Poland, Prussia, Russia, Poland, the Soviet Union, German and, again, Poland. The changes in its national allegiance determined the directions and intensity of migration and different types of ethnic and religious policies. In addition, neighbouring countries often split Podlasie between them, thus severing the historical ethnic, religious and cultural ties, as well as resulting in different ethnic, religious and social development of separated parts. As a consequence, this led to a significant diversification of ethnic and religious structures of different parts of Podlasie. Often, especially in the 20th century, a change of statehood resulted in huge political and systemic transformations, that also to a large extent determined the ethnic and religious relations in Podlasie (Koter and Kulesza, 2001).

The region is now one of the most diverse ones in terms of nationalities and religions. Poles are the most decidedly dominant nationality, though south-eastern part is inhabited by a large Belarusian community. In addition, the ethnic structure of Podlasie includes more numerous groups of Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Russians, Gypsies, formerly also Jews, Armenians and Karaites. The religious mosaic of the region is significantly less diverse, though the south-eastern Podlasie is currently the only region in Poland where Catholics are a minority, with Orthodox Christians being a majority. In addition, the Podlasie region is also inhabited, in very small numbers, by Muslims, Protestants and Old Believers.

2. THE SPATIAL EXTENT

Due to repeated changes to the state and administrative allegiance of the individual parts of Podlasie as a whole, and the lack of clear physiographic boundaries and differences in the definition of the region in historical, administrative and physical-geographical terms, any clear delimitation is hard. For the purposes of this paper, Podlasie will mean the contemporary Podlaskie province (Fig. 1–2), as its area includes both the ethnic Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian borderland, as well as the religious one between Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. Also, due the administrative expansion to the north and east it now includes the Polish-Lithuanian ethnic and national borderland, as well as areas inhabited by Muslim Tatars and Russian Old Believers. Moreover, the present Podlaskie province is also the Polish state borderland with Lithuania and Belarus, as well as a part of the eastern border of the European Union.

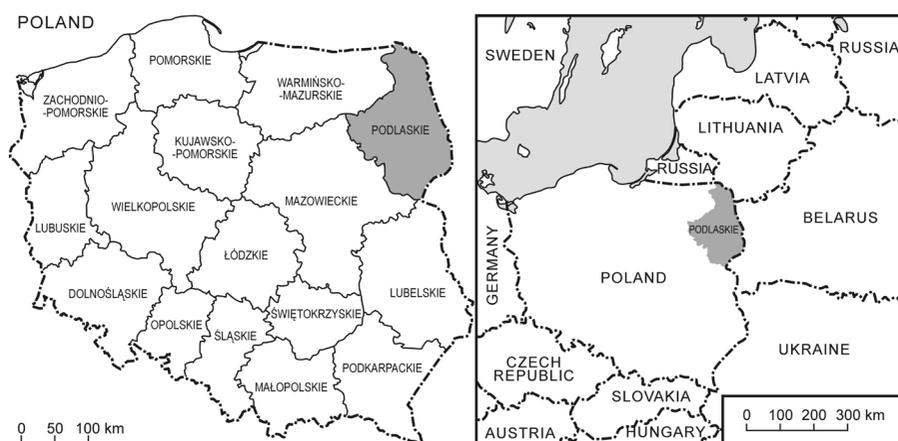


Fig. 1. Podlaskie province

Source: own elaboration

3. THE BORDERLAND OF PEOPLES, RELIGIONS AND CULTURES

Individual ethnic and religious groups are very hard to distinguish in Podlasie. This is an area of not contact, but of overlapping of different ethnoses and cultures. The specificity of the Podlasie borderland, especially its south-eastern part, is related to the ethnic, religious and cultural mosaic. Consequently, the coexistence of neighbouring Slavic (Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian) communities with no clear separation, especially linguistic one, formed this zonal borderland, which separates and differentiates these communities to a really small extent. This makes it harder to determine its spatial extent, which is usually not only ethnically diverse, but also may be spatially vast due to the processes of assimilation and migration. Instead of a clear line separating the ethnicities and denominations in this region, we can notice the more or less extensive transitional zone, with relatively frequent feeling of belonging to two nations at the same time, differences between ethnic declarations and, sometimes, the dominance of regional identity over ethnic one (Mironowicz, 1992; Sadowski, 1995; Koter, 1995).

The situation in the northern part of Podlasie (Suwałki) is different, with clear linguistic separation between Poles and Lithuanian, despite religious unity. It is a small area densely inhabited by the Lithuanian minority with actively operating Lithuanian social organisations, which stands out against the neighbouring municipalities, not only in national and cultural, but also economic, social and political terms. With its intensive contacts with foreign homeland, it fully deserves the name 'little Lithuania' commonly used by the inhabitants. This territorial concentration, linguistic distinctness, social and cultural activity, as well as well-developed education form a very strong national identity among the Lithuanian of Podlasie. While Lithuanians consider their language to be the basis of maintaining their identity, the few Russian Old Believers and the descendants of Tatar settlers still inhabiting Podlasie find that their own religion and traditions are the key.

Multiethnicity, which is the most characteristic feature of the Podlasie borderland, does not only involve several nations (Poles, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and, to a lesser extent, Tatars, the Romani, Russians) living in the area, but also the occurrence of a number of complex, intersecting ethnic categories, meaning identification with more than one ethnic group and the formation of a category of population which identifies as 'local' despite their objective ethnic identity (Sadowski, 1995; Plit, 2008, 2014). This is due to numerous factors, including the sometimes still poorly formed sense of ethnic identity, which is apparent especially among the Orthodox population, and the blending of boundaries between nationalities caused by growing up under the cultural and political influence of various ethnoses and denominations, as well as linguistic relations, assimilation and the often dominant sense of territorial and local identity. This situation is typical for the population of zonal borderlands and is further amplified in the case of Podlasie by the relatively

strong processes of Polonisation of eastern-Slavic communities and their linguistic and cultural affinity. In Podlasie, the category of ‘locality’ is also an expression of strong attachment to the area a person lives in, as well as the dislike for clear ethnic declarations present among some inhabitants of the multiethnic borderland, especially minority groups (Smith, 1986; Markusse, 2003; Plit, 2008, 2014).

4. CURRENT CHANGES IN ETHNIC, LINGUISTIC AND RELIGIOUS STRUCTURE OF PODLASIE

Another aspect of the ethnic borderland in Podlasie, which often arouses controversy, is the process of the rebirth of the Ukrainian national consciousness among some Orthodox communities. The phenomenon of re-Ruthenisation is now undisputed, proven, among others, by E. Mironowicz (1992), A. Sadowski (1995), M. Barwiński (2004, 2013a), as well as by the results of the last two censuses of 2002 and 2011.¹ Moreover, the process is largely justified historically, linguistically and culturally. The active social and cultural efforts by the representatives of the Ukrainian elites in Podlasie are also not without significance. However, the scope and scale of this phenomenon is currently difficult to objectively and unambiguously determine.

Podlasie is also a linguistic borderland, where various languages: Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Russian have been co-existing and intersecting for centuries. Part of the population, especially rural, is aware that they use a dialect more closely related to East Slavic languages (Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian) than Polish. Scientific research confirms the existence of a number of different East Slavic dialects in Podlasie. These dialects are considered primarily in local, rather than national, terms, as the main language inherited from one’s home, tightly related to the area a person inhabits, as an element of ‘locality’ and the specific feature of the Podlasie borderland. During the 2011 census, 1730 people in Podlasie province declared that they use some dialect in ‘home contacts’, including 669 describing it as Polish-Belarusian borderland dialect, 549 as Belarusian dialect and 512 as Belarusian-Ukrainian dialect. Moreover, languages spoken at home also included Belarusian (25 549 people), Lithuanian (4859), English (2765), Ukrainian (2052), Russian (1524), Romani (420).²

The multiethnic character of the national borderland is also accompanied by bi-religious borderland. In addition to completely dominant Christian faiths – Catholicism and Orthodoxy – others, mostly various factions of Protestantism and

¹ During the 2002 census, Ukrainian nationality was declared in Podlasie by 1,441, compared to 2,686 in 2011 (according to CSO data).

² Based on *Ludność w województwie podlaskim/Population in Podlaskie province...* (2013).

Islam, are marginal. Religious affiliation in Podlasie often was and is synonymous with national identity and frequently becomes the main criterion for ethnic and cultural differences. It is also an important element of defending the national identity and distinctness, especially in minority groups. This results in the formation of very strong stereotypes in the social consciousness concerning the ethnic and religious structure of Podlasie. However, today some of these stereotypes are outdated. Studies (including Mironowicz, 1992; Sadowski, 1995; Sobczyński, 2001; Koter, 2003; Barwiński, 2004) have shown that there is still a very strong relationship between Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian nationality and Orthodox denomination, as well as between Catholicism and Polish or Lithuanian nationality. However, widespread stereotypical identification of the whole Orthodox community with Belarusian or Ukrainian minority is not confirmed by research or the results of the latest census in 2011, mainly due to the large proportion of people declaring Polish nationality among Orthodox population. To a large extent this is caused by the processes of assimilation of the Orthodox population, which is far more intense in linguistic and ethnic than in religious terms, which means ethnic assimilation without religious conversion.

This clear dominance of Orthodox population over the people declaring Belarusian identity in Podlasie has been proven by the 2011 census, which for the first time since 1931 included a question of religious identity. In Podlasie, 119,653 people declared that they were members of the Polish Orthodox Church, while the total number of Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian population was only 42,622. This means that, according to CSO data, only 35.6% Orthodox Christians in Podlasie declare an East Slavic ethnic identity, with 'Orthodox Pole' being dominant among them (Tab. 1). If we consider the whole Poland, 97,802 (62.2%) of all 156,284 members of the Orthodox Church declared only Polish nationality.

Table 1. Declared religious denomination in Podlaskie province in 2011

Denomination	Declarations total
Roman Catholic Church	977,013
Orthodox Church	119,653
Jehovah's Witnesses	2,450
Pentecostal Church	770
Lutheran Church	187
Greek-Catholic Church	169
Others	2,681
Not belonging to any denomination	10,364
Refused to answer	62,023

Source: CSO data: <http://stat.gov.pl/> (24.04.2014).

During the same census, as in 2002, the question of national identity was included. However, the census method used in 2011 differed significantly from the previous one. The wording of questions about nationality, especially for calculating the national structure, biased the results and limited their credibility. The factor that most influenced the deformation of results concerning nationality-related issues was the possibility to declare double ethnic identification while automatically assigning people who have chosen the ‘minority’ identity as their secondary one to an ethnic minority group, despite their primary Polish identification.³

One of the most important consequences of this different census method was the clear and universal increase in the number of members of national and ethnic minorities in Poland, especially regional groups, except for German and Belarusian minorities (Barwiński, 2014). These nationwide rules also concerned Podlasie, where the number of people declaring American and Ukrainian nationalities grew most, while Russian nationality grew slightly, and the number of people identifying with Belarusian nationality clearly fell (Tab. 2).

Table 2. The national structure of the inhabitants of the Podlaskie province according to the 2002 and 2011 censuses^a

Nationality	Year			
	2002	2011		
	Population		Ethnic structure	
	total		homogeneous (single)	complex (double)
Total	1,208,606	1,202 365	×	×
including Polish	1,135,347	1,144,373	1,127,874	16,499
other than Polish	55,199	51,310	33,930	17,380
including:				
Belarusian	46,420	39,105	27,000	12,105
Lithuanian	5,156	4,904	4,007	897
Ukrainian	1,441	2,686	1,225	1,461
Russian	647	832	381	450
Romani	369	527	×	×
Tartar	323	539	×	×
American	71	590	50	539

Note: ^a Total population with and without Polish citizenship.

Source: based on CSO studies *Ludność w województwie podlaskim* (2013).

³ The method used to conduct the 2011 census and the controversies related to its results were extensively discussed, among others, in the article by M. Barwiński (2014), The ethnic structure of Poland in light of the results of the 2011 National Census.

Due to the lack of CSO publication covering full ethnicity data for 2011 at municipality level, precise analysis of the territorial distribution of individual minorities in Podlasie is impossible, so is a detailed comparison with 2002 census results. Based on available data, we can presume that only two minorities – Belarusian and Lithuanian – exhibit clear territorial concentration in their respective traditional regions: Lithuanians in the Polish-Lithuanian borderland, especially in Puńsk and Sejny, Belarusians in the south-eastern part of Podlasie. At the same time, there is a clear tendency among the Belarusian minority to decrease concentration in municipalities where they constitute a large portion of the population. In 2002, Belarusians amounted to over 40% of the total population in eight municipalities in Podlasie, while in 2011 this number fell to four (Czyże, Dubicze Cerkiewne, Orła, Hajnówka) (Fig. 2).

The most important among the changes in the ethnic structure of Podlaskie province is the clear decrease in the number of people declaring themselves as Belarusian – from 46.4 thousand to 39.1 thousand, and just 27 thousand in the case of single identifications, over the nine years from 2002 to 2011 (Tab. 2). During the last census, more than 12 thousand people in Podlasie declared Belarusian identity along with a different one, usually Polish, more often putting it first. The decline of Belarusian linguistic identity is even faster. Among the 39.1 thousand people in Podlasie that declared Belarusian nationality in 2011, only 25.5 thousand (65.2%) confirmed that they used Belarusian language in day-to-day contacts, while just 15 thousand (38.4%) claimed it as their native tongue.

We could claim that the ethnic assimilation of population of Belarusian descent will be progressing in Podlasie, while their religious distinctness will be maintained, and Belarusians – if not universally, then in large numbers – will transform from an ethnic minority into a regional group of Orthodox Poles.

Two most numerous and territorially concentrated non-Polish communities in Podlasie, the Belarusians and the Lithuanians, have some things in common – they are native ethnic minorities, they live in the peripheral areas of the country and they are compact centres of neighbouring nation with its own state.⁴ However, despite these significant similarities, there are many factors that clearly differentiate the two minorities: population, susceptibility to assimilation, the sense of group integration, institutionalisation, religious and linguistic autonomy and the relations with their foreign homeland.

⁴ According to the classification of national minorities by M. Koter (1993).

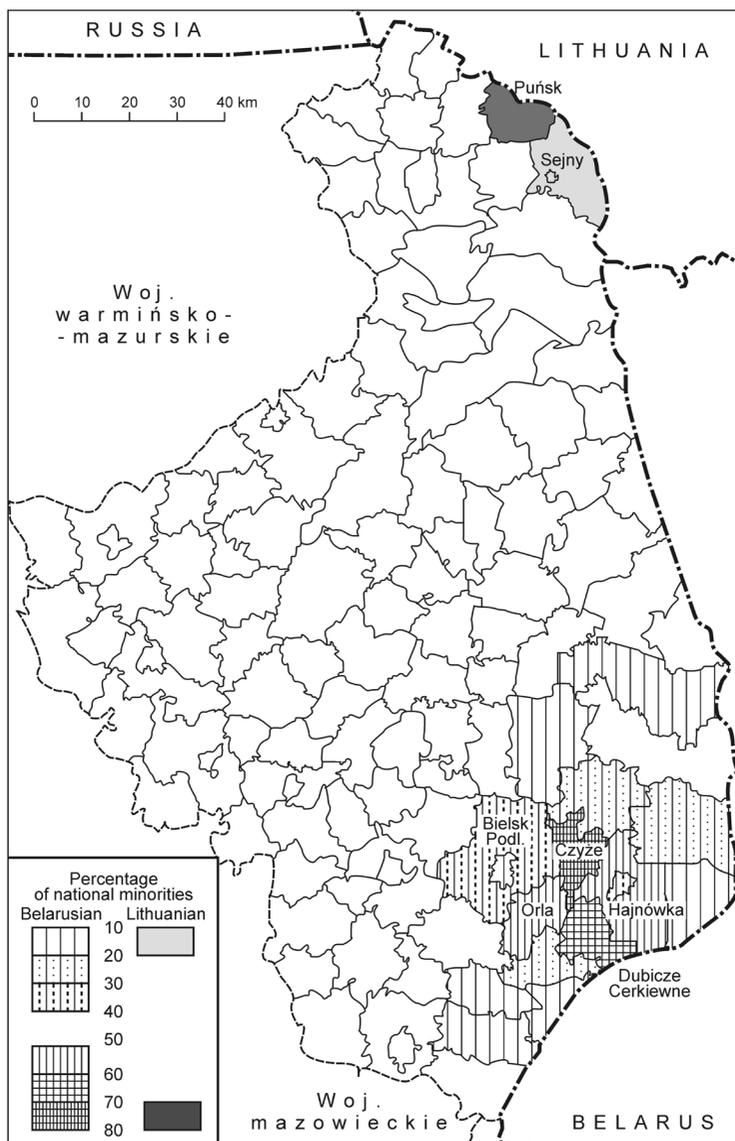


Fig. 2. Municipalities in Podlasie where national minorities amounted to over 10% of total population according to the 2011 census

Source: based on data from the Ministry of Administration and Digitisation, <https://mniejszosci.narodowe.mac.gov.pl> (14.05.2015)

5. THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHANGES OF GEOPOLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN MUTUAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES IN PODLASIE

A comparison between the situations of Lithuanians and Belarusians shows that a great number of people living in the borderland located near their own homeland does not guarantee positive support from it. The determining factors include political relations between the authorities of the country of residence and the homeland, their economic potential, the function of the state border and its 'permeability', as well as the type of trans-border relations and the relationship between the minority and their compatriots back in their nation-state. In the case of Belarusians even their relatively large population, religious autonomy and territorial concentration do not guarantee maintaining national distinctiveness. The main obstacles are their passivity and vulnerability to assimilation (mainly national and linguistic), as well as the small degree of group integration (except for the strong religious integration) (Barwiński 2013a).

Despite the decreasing concentration of the Belarusian minority, Podlasie still is its most populated centre in Poland, and the most unifying factor that does not undergo assimilation and most clearly distinguishes people of eastern descent is their Orthodox denomination. A sense of religious identification is much stronger than the non-Polish national identity. According to F. Plit (2008), a lot of people not willing to engage in the discourse of 'Belarusian or Ukrainian' choose to primarily belong to the Orthodox community. It becomes a determinant of their ethnic and cultural belonging, similarly to former Yugoslavia, where there was a legal and *de facto*, Muslim nationality.

It is surely too early to claim that there is a functional Orthodox nation in Podlasie, which does not change the fact that the main factor that differentiates the people of the Białystok region is their denomination. Religious identification (Orthodox-Catholic) clearly dominates the national (Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian) one. The most fundamental cultural, social and political division follows the Catholic-Orthodox line, not the Polish-Belarusian, Polish-Ukrainian or Belarusian-Ukrainian ones. This is proof, on a regional scale, of the worldwide social and cultural transformations. The process of political and economic globalisation and unification of Europe and the world are accompanied by the growing awareness of civilizational, mainly religious, differences (Huntington, 1996). This division is undoubtedly deepened by the location of Podlasie in the zonal borderland dividing Europe from south to north, between the western (Latin) and eastern (Byzantine) Christianity.

The division line that runs roughly along the border between Poland, Belarus and the Ukraine has been shaped by the traditions of western Christianity as well as the influences of Orthodox culture and is the most persistent division line on

the continent (Huntington, 1996; Bański, 2008; Komornicki and Miszczuk, 2010). Since 2004 it has been additionally reinforced – literally (technical border protection) and legally (visa regulations) – with the function of the external EU border, which means that the Podlasie borderland can now be treated as cultural and political border of Western Europe, while the eastern border of the EU serves as the main division line in Europe. As Poland and Lithuania joined the EU and Belarus was left out of its structures, Podlasie was clearly divided into Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Belarusian borderlands.

The contemporary Polish-Belarusian border serves as a barrier between completely different political, economic, legal, social, cultural realities. It clearly divides not only the Polish and Belarusian societies but also Belarusians living on both sides of the border. It differentiates them not only in formal, but also in cultural, mental and economic sense, to a much larger extent than the Ukrainian border, and to an extent incomparable with the Polish-Lithuanian border. It can surely be described as one of the strongest civilisation barriers in modern Europe.

Paradoxically, as a consequence of the policy run by president Lukashenko for over ten years aimed at denationalising Belarusians by removing Belarusian national symbols, limiting the use of Belarusian language (especially in schools), the liquidation of independent Belarusian organisations and media, it is currently easier to be a Belarusian citizen in the Republic of Poland than in the Republic of Belarus. Therefore, the Belarusian state is not as important as a point of reference for the Belarusians in Poland as their motherland is for Lithuanians or Ukrainians (Barwiński, 2013b). Sociological studies confirm that representatives of the Belarusian minority commonly view Poland, not Belarus, as their homeland. They feel a strong emotional, historical and political connection with the Polish state and they assess the Polish society much more positively than the Belarusian people living across the border. In this situation, they commonly assume the role of Polish citizens not Belarusian minority in external contacts (Sadowski, 1995; Kowalski and Solon, 2008).

By limiting the rights of national minorities (including Poles) in their territory, the Lithuanian authorities at the same time give various forms of support, financial, organizational, political, to Lithuanians living abroad. The small number of Lithuanians in Poland, their territorial concentration and a relatively favourable economic situation significantly increase the effectiveness of this aid. For the Lithuanian minority in Poland the main consequences of Poland and Lithuania joining the EU are more intense institutional contact with their foreign homeland and the ability to freely cross the state border, which is of fundamental importance to the community that has been living in the borderland for decades. Especially that not only in the communist period, but practically since the early 1920s, this geographical proximity has not meant any possibility of mutual contacts. For dozens of years, the Polish-Lithuanian border was a very tight barrier that prevented not only normal cross-border cooperation, but even visiting family member liv-

ing a few or a dozen kilometres away. That is why the most important aspect of European integration for the Lithuanians living in northern Podlasie is, literally and practically, the integration of the Polish-Lithuanian border (Kowalski, 2008; Barwiński and Leśniewska, 2014).

6. CONCLUSIONS

Podlasie serves as both an external (interstate, European Union) and internal (ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural) frontier as a region where native ethnic minorities live and interact with the Polish majority.

From the geographical and historical perspective, one of the most interesting features of the Podlasie ethnic and religious borderland is its extraordinary stability or slight variation over a historically long period of time. This concerns mainly the course of the Catholic-Orthodox border. The division of Podlasie into the western part with dominant Catholic population, and the eastern part where Orthodox people prevail, has been present for several hundred years. Meanwhile the ethnic border zone between Poland, Belarus and Ukraine has now moved east. This change in the course of both types of borders is largely caused by the progressive ethnic assimilation among the East Slavic population of Podlasie and the resulting widespread identity of 'Orthodox Pole'.

According to the typology of borderlands proposed by M. Koter (1995), depending on the genesis and nature of the inhabitants, an ethnic-religious borderland in south-eastern Podlasie should be classified as a contact zone for related national living area in this case Polish, Belarusian and Ukrainian. The kinship of nationalities forming this borderland leads to the linguistic and cultural assimilation, as well as to the gradual loss of the sense of national separateness of individual communities, which in turn results in assimilation with Polish majority, large variability in ethnic declarations, the sense of belonging to two nationalities and the declarations of being 'local'. Religious diversity is thus more important, as it often serves as the main element of individuality. This is why Catholic-Orthodox diversity is now far more pronounced in Podlasie than Polish-Belarusian or Belarusian-Ukrainian diversity.

According to the same typology (Koter, 1995), the Polish-Lithuanian borderland in northern Podlasie may be classified as a zone of contact between different national living areas. This type of borderland emerges between groups with significant cultural or linguistic differences, and the interpenetration of different nationalities does not lead to the loss of autonomy or linguistic assimilation. Despite their religious identity, native character and many centuries of common history with Polish nation and state, the Lithuanian minority clearly differs from Poles. Lithuanians are currently one of the best organised and integrated national mi-

norities in Poland, with a strong sense of national identity and a relatively high resistance to assimilation.

Borderlands, especially those highly diverse in terms of nationality, religion, language and culture, are often identified with unstable, conflict-prone areas with past and present antagonism between nations sharing them. This belief has intensified over the last few decades when nationalisms, separatist tendencies and historical conflicts got sparked again in numerous regions of Central and Eastern Europe. However, not all European borderlands have to be stereo-typically identified with areas of conflict, resentment and even hatred among the peoples inhabiting them (Rumley and Minghi, 1991; Brubaker, 1996; Hastings, 1997; Haase, 2003; Minghi, 2005; Bufon *et al.*, 2014). This is the case, among others, in Podlasie, where there are centuries-old traditions of cohabitation of diverse communities. As a result of political and settlement transformations, the proportions of individual ethnic and cultural categories changed, even though these transformations were evolutionary and without perceivable social unrest. The ethnic and religious diversity, the clash between migration waves and cultural patterns coming from different directions made Podlasie a typical example of cultural borderland where a certain attitude of borderland people emerged. The ‘borderland person’ living there is tolerant, multi-cultural, uses different languages or dialects, his or her family and friends include people of different denominations and nationalities, he or she often feels the sense of belonging to two nations and cultures, participates in holidays, celebrations and customs from different communities, is strongly attached to the region, his or her own ‘little homeland’ (Mironowicz, 1992; Sadowski, 1995; Plit, 2008, 2014).

Based on his own long-lasting sociological research, A. Sadowski (1995) postulated that in Podlasie ‘there emerged certain rules for interethnic cohabitation, that resulted in social order where the existing differences are visible but do not cause any social conflicts.’ This has been confirmed by M. Barwiński’s research (2004), which clearly shows very high – at least in declarations – tolerance for different nationalities and the subjective belief of most respondents (especially in rural areas) about the lack of ethnic and religious conflicts. Unfortunately, this idyllic picture of Podlasie borderland has been disrupted in recent years by, among others, the repeated devastation of bilingual Polish-Lithuanian and Polish-Belarusian signs with town names, the profanation of Jewish cemeteries, the arson at the Centre for Muslim Culture and the repeated attacks on immigrants in Białystok.

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