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Undesirable Borderlands. Nationality Policy of the Authorities of the Second Republic in the 1930s in Ethnically Transitional Areas

Abstract

Ethnic borderlands were an important part of the national landscape of the Second Republic of Poland. They existed in the areas of contact between the Polish national population and the most important national minority groups inhabiting distinct territories: Ukrainians, Belarusians and Germans. Especially in the 1930s, they aroused growing interest in the state administration. The purpose of this article is to outline different policies of the Sanation camp toward "ethnically transitional areas". These policies varied, but their final goal was always unification through the Polonization of the communities inhabiting such borderlands.

Keywords

ethnic borderlands, Second Republic, Sanation camp, nationality policy, national minorities

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In the cultural context, or even in the narrower sense of nationality, the term "borderland" tends to be not only a descriptive, but also an evaluative term. It seems that until recently it more often evoked positive connotations with the beneficial effects of an "osmotic" process, leading to mutual enrichment of neighboring – and mixed – communities. In the interwar period, similar interpretations were also made within political circles active in the Second Republic, including those in power since 1926, such as the Piłsudski camp. However, in the 1930s, members of this group progressively changed their opinions on the consequences of the existence within the Polish state of ethnically transitional territories, i.e. ethnically unformed territories, located at the junction of large and recognized national groups living in the state.

The issue was and is still disputed. During the interwar period, especially political forces representing national minorities were inclined to deny the existence of such borderlands. In this view, Polish authorities' exposure of their existence was treated as a deliberate "production of tribes," serving exclusively Polish interests. It was argued that such measures are designed to weaken the position of national minorities, as they conceal attempts of Polonization. At present, these discussions are mainly academic both in Polish historiography and international studies. Until the end of the 1980s, and in the literature of our eastern neighbors to this day, there was a very strongly voiced view, which can be simplistically described as a denial of the existence of national border areas, as a living area of groups that are not defined strictly in terms of nationality (Michowicz, 1988, p. 288; Tomaszewski, 1985, pp. 46, 52, 77; Кривуть, 2012, p. 3; Памяць, 1998, p. 93). However, also in this period there were estimates taking into account the existence of these borderlands (Michowicz, 1988, p. 288; Mędrzecki, 1983). More recent Polish historiography seems to share the latter point of view (Linkiewicz, 2018, pp. 25–123; Paruch, 1997, p. 162). As an aside, it should be noted that this view is close to mine.

In order to define "ethnically transitional groups," I have chosen the definition formulated in the 1980s by Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, who, placing emphasis on the subjective factor in determining national consciousness, described these groups as having no sense of belonging to a specified "ideological homeland" (Mędrzecki, 1983,

pp. 236–237). In practice, this meant communities either lacking a "modern" national consciousness (like some Polesie residents), or labile in this regard, as was sometimes the case in the Polish–German borderlands.

Given the controversial nature of the issue, and certainly the peculiar "nebulousness" of "ethnically transitional" communities in the Second Republic, we can only estimate their scale. More recent literature assumes that, in absolute numbers, these groups totaled well over one million inhabitants of the interwar Polish state[1]. One should add to this figure several hundred thousand residents of the Polesie voivodeship from among the group that the 1931 census reported as so-called "locals"[2]. Consequently, it can be conservatively estimated that the "ethnically transitional" communities numbered up to 2 million citizens of the Polish state.

The key issue is to identify those territories of the Second Republic that should be defined as borderlands, as well as the size of the "transitional groups" inhabiting them. Generalizing, we can use a simplified division into eastern and western Polish ethnic borderlands. A more detailed description of these regions should include, in the "western" part, Silesia (Wanatowicz, 1995, pp. 17, 20) and the Kashuby region[3] which is not always mentioned in this context, while in the "eastern" part, the southeastern districts of the Lublin region, as well as the Carpathian Foothills. If one considers the Poleshuks as a "transitional group" – which one does for the purposes of this article – then one would have to add to this simplified division the

1 A figure of 1.4 million is usually given, but this figure should probably be treated as an estimate, rather accurately reflected the actual state of affairs (Paruch, 1997, p. 162). Detailed calculations: (Mędrzecki, 1983, pp. 247–250).

2 The census showed 707,088 declarations of the "local" language, (*Second census*, 1938, p. 24). Mędrzecki expressed the opinion that this figure should be increased by 100,000 inhabitants of the neighboring Novogrudok and Volyn provinces (Mędrzecki, 1983, p. 243). I would lean towards a different estimate, given the political aspect of the operation that was the 1931 census. However, this does not absolutely mean denying the existence of an "ethnic transitional group" of several hundred thousand in Polesie (Cichoracki, 2014, p. 25).

3 Mędrzecki did not qualify Kashubia as an "ethnically transitional" area, but Janusz Kutta, the author of the fundamental study on the history of the region in the interwar period, practically does so, (Kutta, 2003, pp. 13–14). See also Borzyszkowski, 1995, pp. 136–137.

(Polish)–Belarusian–Ukrainian ethnographic borderland within the Polesie voivodeship.

When presenting the very schematic overview, I should make a few caveats. First of all, we are dealing with a very large range in the size of "transitional ethnic groups" living in the regions mentioned. By far the largest are the Poleshuks ("locals"), a community numbering even, according to conservative estimates, several hundred thousand people. The medium-sized groups category would include "transitional groups" living among Silesians and residents of the Lublin region (100,000–150,000). The smallest groups would comprise regional clusters of homesteaded gentry (ranging from several tens of thousands), the most important of which was that concentrated in Podkarpacie, the eastern part of the Lviv province and the Stanislaw province.

It is clear from the above tally that the groups listed do not amount to the indicated global figure of "up to 2 million." What is missing here are both transitional Polish–Jewish and Polish–Belarusian groups (with the exception of the Polesie group, treated here as a whole), as well as several Polish–Ukrainian groups mentioned in the literature (Mędrzecki, 1983, pp. 247–250), or even "Ukrainian-Ruthenian" groups if one keeps in mind the distinctive features of the communities living in the Eastern Carpathians, and especially if one takes into account the Polish authorities' approach to this issue in the late 1930s (Bruski, 1995, pp. 167, 168; Stawecki, 1969, pp. 199–200). Those groups that have been identified, however, are worth special attention for two reasons. Their geographic location is usually easy to pinpoint, and their settlement area coincides with more common geographic-historical concepts. More importantly, however, they were the target of more or less accurate and comprehensive political programs that the organs of the Polish state, whether civil administration or the army, tried to implement.

The nationality policy of the Sanation camp, which came to power in 1926 and held it for the next thirteen years, underwent considerable changes. We should also add that these changes were perhaps greater in theory than in practice. In the first stage of its rule, the party adopted a course that could be described as relatively liberal. The underlying idea was to pursue a program of "state assimilation,"

which, in simple terms, can be defined as a sort of exchange between the state and national minorities. The state was to offer a guarantee of freedoms in the areas of social activism, education and culture, expecting in return political loyalty and, in practice, forsaking attitudes and actions that were designed to cause the territorial disintegration of the Second Republic (Chojnowski, 1979, pp. 73–125).

One vital element of nationality policy in the second half of the 1920s was that it would be individualized at the regional (in practice, voivodship) level. When regionalized and made dependent on local, and in each case at least slightly different, conditions, the administration's actions were supposed to become more flexible, and thus more effective (Paruch, 1997, pp. 153–163). It must be noted that, theoretically, the idea of "regionalizing" the nationality policy could also have been a response to the existence of "borderlands" inhabited by "ethnic transitional groups" (or the authorities claiming so). And it is precisely in such areas, requiring, as it were, *ex officio* individual approaches that they could have been applied. In reality, however, this was not the case. This applies to both the second half of the 1920s and the following decade. In the 1930s, Polonization trends – even if we consider them as incomplete programs – strengthened to reach their apogee in the last years before the war. "Regionalism" was no longer an ideological and political slogan and was becoming only a term suitable for describing the fact that the nationality policy of individual provincial governors[4] was not well coordinated. However, bearing in mind the topic analyzed in this article, the 1930s saw a growing number of projects aimed at the Polish national assimilation of "ethnic transitional groups."

"Borderlands" defined in the context of nationality throughout the rule of the Piłsudski camp were treated as existing, albeit worthy of interest as areas of potential Polonization of "transitional ethnic groups." Even in the 1920s the official goal was "national assimilation through regionalization" (Paruch, 1997, p. 162). Interestingly, political figures who cannot in any way be tied to national (nationalist)

4 The insufficient coordination of nationality policy in the 1930s in the neighboring territories (Polesie and Volhynia) is discussed in Cichoracki, 2015, pp. 119–133.

ideology expressed similar views, which shows how ingrained these beliefs were. A glaring example is Leon Wasilewski, whose politics are interpreted in this way by historiography (Paruch, 1997, p. 162). To the end of his life, he remained loyal to the socialist movement, and occupied a prominent place among the activists of the Polish Socialist Party (Friszke, 2013, p. 99). In post-May Poland, this meant a declaration of anti-Sanation views. On the other hand, however, as co-founder and head of the Institute for the Study of Nationality Affairs, he effectively created an intellectual base for the nationality policy of the Sanation camp (Grott, 2013, p. 38). With the passage of time, in fact, statements, similar in spirit, but incomparably harsher in tone, now seem to have been deliberately planned for propaganda use. It is difficult not to consider otherwise the statement of the long-serving (1926–1939) Silesian voivode Michał Grażyński, which he made in October 1938 in Cieszyn, shortly after the annexation of the Zaolzie part of the city to Poland. Responding to tributes from the mayor of the – until recently Czech part of the city – Józef Kożdoń, the governor said bluntly, "We Poles like clear situations ... we cannot tolerate any intermediate types" (Długajczyk, 1983, pp. 349–350). Grażyński was thus articulating his preconceived notion (Wanatowcz, 1995, p. 24). This wording is even more though-provoking given that Kożdoń was considered the leader of the "Silesian" movement, which – probably contrary to the intentions of the movement's activists – could be regarded as an "intermediate ethnic group" in the circumstances of that time (Nowak, 1995, p. 19).

Leaving aside the more or less sophisticated assertions coming from the center or periphery of the Sanation camp, what is important is the arguments used to justify the clear-cut attitude to the "ethnically transitional areas" and the groups of their inhabitants. The essential point was the recognition that, depending how far they had come in the process of acquiring national consciousness, these communities were worse or better suited in the eyes of the ruling camp to be drawn into the Polish ethnic group. The numerical increase in the share of the Polish population in the general group of citizens of the state, if only for the sake of securing internal and external security, had to be considered at least a desirable scenario, if not a priority by the ruling camp. Another argument was that an effective campaign for Polish

national choice carried out within the "transition groups" would be a sort of testament to the quality and strength of Polish culture. It would thus also become more attractive from the point of view of those communities that had no problem defining their non-Polish "ideological homeland" (Paruch, 1995, p. 163).

In the second half of the 1930s, with the growing sense of risk of war, a defensive argument emerged with similar reasoning. It boiled down to the belief that in "ethnically transitional" areas, Polishness was not only not gaining, but was actually retreating under the pressure of actions by national minority circles. Such a situation was diagnosed in both the western and eastern regions. In the spring of 1935, officials of the civil and military administration, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sounded such alarm bells, while also pointing to the "unstable and uncertain elements there, whose national affiliation is not clear" ("Diariusz", 1964, pp. 269–270, 502). In 1938, an operation was launched to weaken the Orthodox Church in the southeastern districts of the Lublin Province, which as indicated above, was also classified as "transitional" territory. The military, the main initiator of the endeavor, which in theory was planned as a more extensive as well as a much more elaborate and nuanced project, also stressed the issue of the "retreat of Polishness" (Sawicki, 1992, p. 109).

In practice, the activities for Polish national assimilation of "transitional groups" can be divided into those aimed at organized social life, language, and, finally, religion. It should be noted that these efforts never had the character of a well-thought-out, comprehensive plan. Although they resulted from the aforementioned general premises, they never constituted a coherent, country-wide coordinated project. As there was a variety of activities, with varying degrees of aggressiveness and varying duration, this could indicate a certain potential for the nationality policy becoming more flexible, depending on local conditions, but, on the other hand, it also proves that the policy was short-term, which was not always beneficial from the point of view of its effectiveness.

It can be argued that the priority in the field of organized social activity was to make it difficult for members of "transitional communities" to join non-Polish structures. It seems that we can identify at least three variants of the state administration's approach to this

issue in the 1930s. The less aggressive scenarios were implemented in the Polish–German borderlands. Let us point out, by the way, that this relative – though uneven – temperance of measures in the western region (Silesia, Kashubia) was typical in every area analyzed here. The most important manifestation of it was discouraging the participation in non-Polish or "separatist" organizations, but maintaining the existence of these structures. However, tolerance for those among them that exposed regional – and, to some extent, ethnic – separateness was not the rule and was not maintained until the end of the interwar period. In Pomerania, this approach was seen when Kashubian organizations were officially tolerated while their activities were obstructed (Regional Association of Kashubians, Union of Kashubian Nobility). Remarkably, the context for this was the belief that Kashubian separatism could be used as a channel for German operations. This case, moreover, shows the deficiencies in the coordination of nationality policy in the western region, since the administration was skeptical of the "regionalist" initiatives that were emerging from the military (ZSZK) (Kutta, 2003, pp. 293–324). The Union for the Defense of Upper Silesians, which operated in the Silesian province, survived until 1934 (Wanatowicz, 1994, pp. 112–113).

In the eastern part of the country, action was much more decisive, which was still visible in the first half of the 1930s. Polesie, the largest and most populous of the "transition areas," can serve as an illustration. The setting for the fundamental revision of the principles of nationality policy – announced with regard to Polesie – was a serious threat to internal security (Cichoracki, 2007, pp. 23–104). The turning point, however, was when the leadership of the local administration recognized that the 1931 census, which showed a community of more than 700,000 "locals" (62.4% of the province's population), not only reflected the real state of affairs, but legitimized the elimination of Belarusian and Ukrainian and even Russian organizations (vital in the late 1920s) from the province. In this perspective, so to speak, these organizations lost the right to function in Polesie for nominal reasons, since the communities they were serving accounted for a marginal part of the province's population according to the official census data: 6.7% Belarusians, 4.8% Ukrainians, 1.4% Russians (*Second census*, 1938, pp. 24–27). As a result, up to and including 1933, not only

were socio-political structures abolished, but also those nominally fulfilling cultural and economic goals (*Report "Development...*, 1933, p. 124; Винниченко, 1997, p. 274).

Under special conditions, it was decided to create "regional" structures, but with strongly Polonizing objectives. Such was the nature of the campaign carried out between 1937 and 1939, and designed to activate, under the auspices of the army, the so-called homestead gentry, which was largely recognized as a community that "has lost a sense of Polish national consciousness and is attacked by both Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalisms" (Stawecki, 1969, p. 180). It is worth noting that activism among this community had many different faces. This translated into its organization. In the south-eastern provinces, branches of the Union of Homesteaded Gentry were set up, while in the northeastern areas, cells of the Union of Polish Homesteaders were established. In the second instance, the aim was to avoid highlighting the exclusive nature of the new movement in the area, where a certain part of the rural population consisted of Poles who could not be recruited into it for formal reasons as it consisted of communities of historically non-noble origin (Stawecki, 1969, pp. 179–188).

After 1926, the state authorities noticed the linguistic particularities of the "transitional areas." To define it, they used the concept of dialects. However, it was always assumed that these dialects were Polish in nature. Thus, they could not serve as a kind of bridge between solely non-Polish national groups, as was the case, for example, in Polesie, i.e. in the area of demarcation between primarily Ukrainian and Belarusian populations (State Archives of Brest Oblast, hereinafter: РАОВ, Polesie Provincial Office, ref. 1/10/2884, k. 67). The example of this region, as well as that of Silesia, shows that the administration's approach to this issue may have been different, although essentially similar assumptions were made (the Polish character of local "dialects"). In the western part, it was deemed that the Silesian "dialect" could be "a component of Polish ideological consciousness" (Wanatowicz, 1995, p. 23). Consequently, we can say that it was, in a way, approved by official bodies.

In Polesia, a fundamentally different scenario was implemented, although it was not without some nuance. Back in the first half of the

1930s, it was recognized that the local dialect should, in the long run, be supplanted by the Polish language, as unlike it, it is not codified, not to mention the whole, widely understood cultural sphere that is not necessarily its asset. This replacement would thus be a relatively natural process as the theory went. Interestingly, in a shorter scheme of things, it was recognized that the "dialect" should not, however, be eradicated, or forcibly eliminated from all spheres of public life at once. This applied to education (more specifically, the language of religious instruction in the state's public schools), as well as to the population's communication with the state apparatus (РАОВ, Polesie Provincial Office, ref. 1/8/1089, k. 1; Загідулін, 2005, p. 20). The belief was that this would justify the elimination of the languages of the three largest Slavic national minorities: Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian. It should be noted that until the end of the 1930s the instructions of the provincial authorities allowed petitioners to address administration officials in the "local" language, in education – with the exception of individual private institutions – the dialect was completely replaced by Polish by 1934 (*Archive of New Records*, Ministry of Internal Affairs, ref. 62, b. 135).

With regard to religion – which, in practice, meant efforts to strengthen the Catholic elements strongly associated with Polishness – the authorities were perhaps relatively the most cautious. The dramatic incidents in the Chełm region in 1938 should be treated – at least with regard to the "transitional areas" – as an exception, rather than a rule in the actions of the government. Similar incidents, though on a smaller scale, occurred in Volhynia. This region, however, can hardly be described as an ethnographically transitional area (Kęsik, 1995, pp. 143–145). In the western Polish ethnic borderlands, the restraint of government actions had a largely objective basis. In both Pomerania and Silesia, it can be considered that by far the majority of the "transitional" communities were Catholic (Wanatowicz, 1995, p. 19). Consequently, there was no room for campaigns to change the existing religious structure.

In the east of Poland, the situation was more complex, the most important sign of which was the role played by the Orthodox Church among the transitional communities. An example of forceful action, aimed, in its essence, at re-Catholization, was the events in the

southeastern areas of Lublin, which were instigated by the military administration. The original plan was to implement a diversified program with regard to the local Orthodox population. It depended on susceptibility to re-Catholization and, in the long run, Polonization. In practice, the most spectacular manifestation of it was the physical removal of infrastructure such as worship sites on the grounds that they were unoccupied or illegally staffed (Stawecki, 1969, pp. 188–201).

However, the example of Polesia shows that re-Catholization was by no means a universal goal for the state administration. Precisely because of the events in neighboring Chełm province, the authorities of the Polesie province steered clear of similar measures. Another reason was the aversion to the neo-Unionist campaign launched by the Vatican, which was, by the way, characteristic of Polish state authorities in general (Klobuk, 2013, p. 159; Śleszyński, 2007, p. 228). It can be inferred from the above that the priority was not to diminish the right of the Orthodox Church to function as such, which is what the political, state-led pressure on believers to change their confession would amount to. This does not mean, however, that changes were not planned or implemented in the sphere of religion, with the aim of winning over "transitional" communities to Polishness. The method, however, was not supposed to be conversion, but Polonization of the Orthodox Church. It seems that it was in the Polesie province, the largest "transitional area," that a set of measures aimed at the Polonization of the Orthodox Church was first developed. These included the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, the gradual Polonization of the liturgy, and finally the imposition of the Polish language on the internal functioning of the Church (РАОВ, Polesie Provincial Office, ref. 1/10/2899, k. 52; Вабішчевіч, 2008, p. 225). It is another matter that these measures, originally introduced in an ethnically borderland territory such as Polesie, became, by the late 1930s, elements of a program imposed on the entire Orthodox Church (Central Military Archives, Independent Information Desk of the Corps District Command No. IX, sign. I 371.9/A.45, pp. 3, 4).

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One of the features of the Second Republic was the unfinished process of forming a national consciousness in a large percentage of its citizens. This had its political implications, which were also reflected in the nationality policy of the Sanation camp. The attitude of the Sanation party to the phenomenon of "transitional" ethnic borderlands contained a paradox. The existence of these "borderlands" was a fact from the point of view of the people of that camp responsible for the concept and implementation of the discussed aspect of domestic policy. This fact was unquestionably beneficial at that, but not because this "borderlandness" was a value in itself from the point of view of the interests of the state. For the ruling circles, the advantage of ethnic borderlands was that they could undergo easier – though usually planned for the long term – liquidation, by being given a Polish character.

In the 1930s, and especially in the second half of that decade, when Polonization became an important – and openly declared – element of the state's nationality policy, the number of "borderlands" being contested increased. This paradoxical trend, involving an interest in "transitional communities" in order to change their "transitional" character, was particularly pronounced in the Polish–Ukrainian borderland, or to use a more capacious term, in the southeastern region. Several years before the outbreak of World War II, it became the object of increased, though not always consistent, efforts, whether exploiting even the hypothetical potential for Polonization (landed gentry) or simply designed to weaken the Ukrainian identity of these groups (Carpathian mountain communities).

The answer to the question of how effective the actions of the authorities of the Second Republic were with regard to the "transitional" communities should be left open. The reason for this is the outbreak of World War II, as it is only in a longer time frame than a few years that one could make judgments on the degree of effectiveness of this nationality policy. On the other hand, it should be assumed that where the Polish language gained a monopoly in the broadest sphere of organized social life (Polesie was an extreme example), the progress of Polonization and thus the erasure of the "borderland" character of a given area should be considered to have been likely.

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List of abbreviations
AAN – Archives of New Records
CAW – Central Military Archives
PAOB – State Archives of Brest Oblast

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