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Socio-economic backwardness in the rural areas of the North-Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic of Poland

1. Introduction

The North-Eastern Borderlands of the Republic of Poland during the interwar period were the most economically and socially backward area, often referred to as Poland B [1]. In the inter-war period, Poland was generally regarded in the European arena as an agricultural country. The level of ruralization in the borderlands was one of the highest in the country with about 80% of the borderland population living in rural areas, and the local economy based primarily on agriculture. One may venture an opinion that it was primarily the rural area that significantly shaped the social and economic landscape of the said region.

The research objective will be to define and evaluate individual elements of the socio-economic backwardness of rural areas of the North-Eastern Borderlands in the Second Republic of Poland. However, the notion of social and economic underdevelopment will be considered as an antonym of the concept of socio-economic development. Unlike the latter, which is positive and is recognized in the context of progress, the notion of underdevelopment is a reference to the category of backwardness, obsolescence, nonmodernity, and anachronism. In the case of the notion of underdevelopment, analogously to the notion of development, the social aspect is a complementary feature of the economic approach, and vice versa, economic backwardness does not occur in iso-

[1] Roman Wapiński wrote that the division into Poland A and B was introduced into the official propaganda of the government in 1936 in the speech of the Parliament by Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, but in the social consciousness, the varying pace of economic and cultural development in these lands was noticed much earlier. "On a broad scale, it is documented by the direction of more massive job migrations, and after recovery of *independence among other, the most attractive regions of agricultural settlement*". R. Wapiński, *Kształtowanie się wyobrażeń o ziemiach wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej w latach?1921–1939,*"Kwartalnik Historyczny" 1993, issue no. 4, p. 201.

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lation from backwardness of the social structure. These two groups of factors will be the main sources of the research analysis. However, the social approach will be analyzed with a reference to a group of specific terrain properties, which essentially influenced the image of civilization backwardness of this area, and the conditions and economic processes will be covered separately. Such a presentation of the subject will provide the possibility of a broader perspective and a more in-depth analysis.

We will limit the area of the North-Eastern Borderlands of the pre-war Republic of Poland to the Vilnius and Novogrodek voivodeships. These lands bordered on the Białystok voivodship in the west, to the Polesie region in the south, to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the east, and to Lithuania and Latvia in the north. It is worth mentioning that when determining the scope of the concept of the Northeastern Border Territories of the Republic of Poland during the interwar period, two important issues call for attention. Firstly, the term 'Northeastern Border' referring to the specific lands of contemporary Poland will be contractual. Every limitation in this matter can be questioned easily. Secondly, when referring to the title of the research topic, it is necessary to consider the Borderlands not in a universal sense (i.e. as a kind of a border between states) but locally, that is, as a territory located within one of them, referring to a specific fragment of reality limited to time and space.

2. Specificity of the region

Polish rural areas of the interwar period were characterized by a highly diverse level of socio-economic development. This was due to several criteria overlapping at the time: traditional, related to historical borders (partitioning) and specific, based on the properties of that terrain. In the first case, it pertains primarily to the historical dimension, that is, to the Russian partition. Over a century under the influence of the occupant resulted in a relatively unfavorable (in relation to other districts of the country remaining under the influence of the policy of other invaders) and delayed socio-economic structure.[2] This will be discussed basically in every part of this article, as it was precisely over 100 years that North-Eastern Borderlands belonged to the Russian Empire, which had a fundamental impact on the development of this territory, precisely the backwardness in relation to other districts of the already independent state that the Second Republic of Poland had become.

In relation to the second criterion, the most common feature of this area owing to which it stands out from other districts in the country will be discussed with its distinctness resulting from fundamental features. When outlining the analysis of the characteristics of particular areas corresponding to the borderline criteria, Marek Koter

[2] See: A. Rosner, *Zróżnicowanie przestrzenne obszarów wiejskich a pożądane kierunki ich rozwoju* [w:] *Obszary wiejskie. Wielofunkcyjność, migracje, nowe wizje rozwoju*, edited by W. Kamińska, K. Heffner, Studia, t. CXXXIII, KPZK PAN, Warsaw 2011, pp. 29–32; A. Rosner, M. Stanny, *Zróżnicowanie poziomu rozwoju gospodarczego obszarów wiejskich w Polsce* [w:] *Zróżnicowanie przestrzenne poziomu rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego obszarów wiejskich a zróżnicowanie dynamiki przemian,* edited by A. Rosner, Warsaw 2007.

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draws a set of features characteristic of the state borderland models. These are: geographic heterogeneity, peripherality, poor accessibility, isolation, low population density, sparse network of cities, poor economic development, dependence and subjugation, multiculturalism, civilization retardation, dissimilarity of behavior, political and social instability, legal dissimilarity and border ethos.[3] All these features are absolutely accurate in the area of the North-Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic of Poland.

Koter emphasized that the most frequently highlighted characteristic of the Polish Borderlands was "a considerable remoteness of this area from the center of the country, its periphery in relation to the centers of power, an intensive economy of living culture, a considerable geographical inaccessibility and peculiar wilderness."[4] Roman Wapiński also pointed out this characteristic and additionally observed that most of the Poles politically engaged in Central and Western Poland considered the Eastern Borderland a remote, almost exotic country.[5] This periphery is considered to be a fundamental feature of the North-Eastern Borderlands. It was the most northeastern part of the Polish state in those times, which in the case of the Vilnius voivodeship created a peninsula bordering with Lithuania, Latvia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This has become one of the most characteristic features on the map of this period, and in the minds of Poles at that time it was more than a specific image of the area. In his reflections on the identity criteria of the borderland, Ryszard Kierniowski writes, "This map, with the characteristic stretch of the Vilnius region to the Dvina River and the narrow Pomerania 'corridor' was one of the state symbols, like the Eagle and the flag, and to this day causes similar emotions, not accompanying the contemporary Polish map."[6]

The nature of the north-eastern voivodeships also included relations between that part of the country and the center of the Polish state. It was a relationship of the inferiority of the land boundaries to the center, which, from the perspective of the North-Eastern Borderlands, was a perception of the center as a heartland of caring for development and defense. From the position of the center, the Borderland could have been perceived as a land characterized by considerable heterogeneity resulting from national, social, linguistic, cultural, religious and mental structures and characterized by considerable economic and civilization delays. In this relation of the center with North-Eastern Borderlands, the qualities of equivalence should also be observed, which resulted from the specific prestige of the Borderlands. The interest in this land from the side of the cultural elite (especially the literary elites) and the fascination with borderland mythology that was present in many environments of the center strength-

[3] M. Koter, *Kresy państwowe – geneza i właściwości w świetle doświadczeń geografii politycznej,* [in:] Kresy – pojęcie i rzeczywistość. Zbiór Studiów, edited by K. Handke, Warsaw 1997, pp. 44–51.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

[5] R. Wapiński, *Kształtowanie się wyobrażeń o ziemiach wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej w latach 1921–1939,* „Kwartalnik Historyczny", 1993, issue no. 4, pp. 196.

[6] R. Kierniowski, *Kresy przez małe i przez wielkie „K" – kryteria tożsamości,* [in:] *Kresy – pojęcie i rzeczywistość...,* p. 112.

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ened the belief in the Polish community of the exceptional value and significance of these lands.[7]

The characteristic feature of the Borderlands in the North-East of the Republic of Poland during the inter-war period was also the image of the frontier with a 'strange world' beyond. This primarily concerned the issue of bordering on the ideologically different USSR and Lithuania. This case was extremely important and was a major factor in the security and development of these lands.

The fact that the Northeastern voivodeships bordered on the USSR has to be analyzed with two aspects taken into account. The first is the prism of the provisions of the Treaty of Riga ending the Polish-Soviet war. Despite being a compromise both on the Polish and the Soviet side, it pointed to the Bolsheviks who "took it as a Soviet diplomatic and political victory." [8] The leaders of the USSR were convinced that the Polish-Soviet border crossing the ethnic territory of Belarus, among others, was a temporary solution. For the USSR, it was an argument justifying the subsequent invasion of Poland in September 1939.[9] The second aspect is the matter of intensified activity of the Communist Party and groups under its influence in this area. These political formations, whose functioning was inspired by the neighbor in the east, had generally the same purpose: to destabilize political and economic life by means of intensifying anti-state agitation, and to create an air of danger and temporality.[10]

Throughout the interwar period, Polish-Lithuanian relations were hostile due to territorial disputes, and above all, to the conflict over Vilnius. It obviously affected the situation in the disputed area. The Lithuanian government both morally supported and seriously subsidized the Lithuanian minority residing in that region. On the other hand, the Polish authorities believed that the development of the Lithuanian cultural, educational and economic life "under the influence of the propaganda of the Kovno factors and for the money of the Lithuanian State [...] exceeds the natural needs of the Lithuanian people by several times."[11] Irredentist desires were perceived in these actions. As a result of the clashing attitudes of the two states, a fierce nationalist struggle broke out in this area, with Poland mobilizing its entire administrative apparatus (including the army) and Lithuania reaching for the most widespread countermeasures.

Next features distinguishing the North-Eastern Borderlands to be discussed belong to the group of demographic characteristics. Firstly, it should be mentioned that it was the least populated area in the country. At the verge of the Second Republic, about 1.8 million people lived there, accounting for about 7% of the total population of Po-

[7] K. Handke, *Pojecie „kresy" na tle relacji centrum – peryferie*, [in:] *Kresy – pojęcie i rzeczywistość...*, pp. 59–60.

[8] J. Karski, *Wielkie mocarstwa wobec Polski 1919–1945. Od Wersalu do Jałty,* Lublin 1998, p. 62.

[9] *Ibidem,* p. 292.

[10] P. Wróbel, *Kształtowanie się białoruskie świadomości narodowej a Polska,* Warszawa 1990, pp. 72–73.

[11] Archives of Modern Records, Vilnius Voivodeship Office [further referred to as: AAN, UWW] sign. no. 978/8, „Sprawa litewska", p. 5.

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land at that time.[12] The population density of the voivodships in question (an average of 34.8 inhabitants per square kilometer) was significantly different from the national average, which in 1921 was 69.2 inhabitants per square kilometer. This was largely due to the intense population movements that were characteristic of the demographic picture of the eastern lands of that period. The widespread depopulation of the north-eastern lands occurred during World War One. In Vilnius, compared to the pre-war period, it reached 30%.[13] This was different in a spatial approach, for example, 27% of the population in the Lidzkie district, 32% in the Oshmyany or 48% in the Vilnius-Trakai.[14] In the Novogrodek region, this factor was at a level of 37%.[15]

The intensified migration processes continued in the North-Eastern Borderlands until the end of 1923. This discussed region constituted a significant part of the area of the Polish-Bolshevik War, which lasted from late autumn of 1918 until mid-October 1920, and in a formal sense ended with the signature of the Treaty of Riga on March 18, 1921.

In the 1930s, the number of people in the north-eastern provinces increased to 2,332,049 people. The population growth in 1921–1931, as illustrated in Table 2, was very high and significantly deviated from the national average.[16] On the one hand, it was caused by natural growth, and on the other, by the balance of natural population movements and migration, as evidenced by the population growth rate in the following years. In 1931–1935, this indicator amounted to 12.9% in the Vilnius voivodeship, 16.4% in Novogrodek, with a 13% in the national average.[17] This trend also persisted in the consecutive years 1936–1938. It excelled in the Novogrodek voivodeship with an increase of 14.9%, followed by Vilnius – 11.6%. Nationwide, this figure was 11.2%.[18]

The demographic feature was undoubtedly multiculturalism and the ethnic complexity of the area in question. "These were areas inhabited by people using different

[12] These data are not accurate because the basis was the first universal census carried out in 1921, which in the case of the Vilnius voivodeship did not cover the so-called Central Lithuania. The population of the Vilnius voivodeship in this census was 476,164 people. The number of 530 thousand of inhabitants of Central Lithuania was added to this. *Pierwszy powszechny spis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 30 IX 1921r. Mieszkania. Ludność. Stosunki zawodowe. Województwa wileńskie, nowogródzkie,* „Statystyka Polski", volume 13, Warsaw 1928, p. 5.

[13] W. Studnicki, *Zarys statystyczno-ekonomiczny ziem północno-wschodnich z XXXVII tablic statycznych,* Vilnius 1922, p. 23.

[14] LCVA, UWW, sign. no. 51.5.1542, „Postulaty gospodarcze sfer przemysłowych i handlowych województw wileńskiego i nowogródzkiego (z narady u Prezydenta 16 X 1930 r.)", p. 300.

[15] W. Studnicki, *op. cit.,* p. 23.

[16] The largest rate of population growth in the country scale in those years also belonged to the borderland Poleskie Voivodship, and amounted to 51%. *Rocznik Statystyczny Wilna 1931*, Vilnius 1931, p. 210.

[17] In the interwar period, the highest natural growth rate was registered among the orthodox population. For example, in the years 1931–1938 this population nationwide increased by 123 thousand people. *Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 1938*, Warsaw 1938, p. 43.

[18] *Ibidem,* pp. 42–45.

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languages, professing different religions and belonging to different cultural circles," states Piotr Eberhardt in relation to the whole of the Eastern Borderlands.[19] Eugeniusz Królikowski in reference to Vilnius writes, "The Vilnius region in terms of nationality and regional relations is a colorful mosaic not found anywhere else"[20]. Zbigniew Zaporowski sees the characteristic of the North-Eastern Borderlands resulting from the national structure in two factors: 1) the area of "the predominance of the Polish population", 2) "for a large number of Belarussian population – this area was a peculiar nursery in which political, cultural, social life pulsated."[21]

The largest ethnic groups inhabiting the North-Eastern Borderlands are Catholic Poles who prevailed in the Vilnius voivodship and in the northern counties of the Novogrodek voivodship; Orthodox Belarussians living in numerical superiority in powiats bordering the USSR and in the south of the Novogrodek voivodship, as well as Jews constituting an important part of the urban population of this area. Smaller ethnic communities also lived in the Northeastern Borderlands, which in some parts of the area were an important part of the national and religious landscape. The Lithuanian population in the Polish-Lithuanian border areas, the Russian population in the Braslav region of the Vilnius voivodeship, the Tatra population dispersed in small colonies throughout the area, and Karaims in Trakai and its surroundings.[22]

The social and occupational structure of the north-eastern territories of Poland in the inter-war period differed significantly from other parts of the country. The system of social relations in this area was one of the most backward ones in the scale of the state, which in turn was a derivative of the economic structure of the border voivodeships.[23] It was the least industrialized part of Poland, where agriculture was the dominant branch of the economy. In 1931, 77% of the population made a living from agriculture (with the national average at 60%).[24] Therefore, peasants were the most numerous social group in the North-Eastern Borderlands.

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[19] P. Eberhardt, *Kresy Wschodnie – granice, terytorium, ludność polska,* [in:] *Europa nie prowincjonalna. Przemiany na ziemiach wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (Białoruś, Litwa, Łotwa, Ukraina, wschodnie granice III Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) w latach 1772–1999,* edited by K. Jasiewicz, Warsaw 1999, p. 37.

[20] *Wileńszczyzna,* edited by E. Królikowski, Rome 1946, p. 48.

[21] The author has included two counties of Białystok Voivodeship to the area of the Borderlands of the North-East of the Republic of Poland (Vologda and Grodno) in addition to the Vilnius and Nowogródek voivodships. Z. Zaporowski, *Stosunki polityczno-społeczne na północno-wschodnich kresach Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1939,* [in:] *Społeczeństwo białoruskie, litewskie i polskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej (Białoruś Zachodnia i Litwa Wschodnia w latach 1939–1941),* edited by M. Giżewska & T. Strzembosz, Warsaw 1995, p. 57.

[22] E. Kirwiel, *Kresy Północno-Wschodnie RP w latach 1918–1939. Oblicze polityczne,* Lublin 2011, pp. 32–40.

[23] M. Leczyk, *Oblicze społeczno-polityczne Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej,* Warsaw 1988, pp. 91–92.

[24] Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dnia 9 XII 1931 r. Mieszkania. Gospodarstwo domowe. Ludność. Stosunki zawodowe. Województwo wileński, „Statystyka Polski", C series, issue no. 36, Warsaw 1936, p. 35; Drugi powszechny spis ludności z dnia 9 XII 1931 r. Mieszkania. Gospodarstwo domowe.

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Among the properties characterizing the borderland society as an anachronistic social structure is the dominant position of a very diverse peasant class, the majority of which are owners of small and dwarf-size land property; a large number of agricultural workers engaged in employed, unqualified, seasonal work; a merely nonexistent layer of intelligence; remnants in the consciousness of the borderland population of state divisions, i.e. the nobility, the peasants and the bourgeoisie; the functioning of specific groups of the agricultural population of this region – large landowners and military settlers; the relationship between the social system and the national stratification of the inhabitants of this area; the highest percentage of illiterates in the country.[25]

It is also worth mentioning the specificity of this part of the country in the relationship between national stratification and social relations. This specificity was manifested in the fact that the majority of Belarussians and Lithuanians owned small, often unprofitable farms. The Jews, most of them living in cities and towns, dealt with commodity trade, and the Poles were middle-class peasants, industrial workers, intellectuals and owners of large estates. Such a division of social roles in relation to nationality did not create a prerequisite for the economic development in the area, and even on the contrary, aggravated divisions and led to an even greater stagnation and a collapse. It is worth noting that the socio-occupational structure of the north-eastern lands in the interwar period did not undergo major changes. The social transformations that took place during this period in the area of two northeastern provinces resulted in the impoverishment of a large part of the borderland society. They certainly did not contribute to the development of social relations towards the modern model that prevailed in Western European countries, where the proportion of people living from agriculture to the non-agricultural population was as high as 1:3, and the level of agriculture was classified at a much higher level of development.

3. Economy

The North-Eastern Borderlands were the most economically backward part of Poland at the time. There were many factors that conditioned such a state of affairs. Let us start with historical reasons. This area belonged to the Russian partition during World War One and for decades remained an integral part of Russia's economic organism. After regaining independence, the economic unions of the territories of the north-eastern provinces with the Russian markets and raw materials broke down. So, the task was to create new economic structures and find new markets for supply and demand for agriculture and the local industry. It is worth to mention the fact that this area belonged to one of the more neglected European parts of the country in the times of the Russian Empire, considered as economic periphery. Already in the beginning, the Polish state

Ludność. Stosunki zawodowe. Województwo nowogródzki, „Statystyka Polski", C series, issue no. 71, Warsaw 1938, p. 58.

[25] E. Kirwiel, *op. cit.,* pp. 40–48.

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had already inherited lands burdened by a huge civilization delay from the Russian occupation.

Such a state of affairs overlapped with enormous destruction after World War One. The Front crossed the lands of the future at the end of the war, this area was utterly devastated. In Vilnius, "nearly 87,000 buildings were destroyed, or about 2,500 settlements."[26] The Novogrodek area was even more devastated, because "nearly 128,000 buildings were destroyed." The Germans took out industrial objects, building materials, livestock, treasures of culture and even everyday objects from these areas. They also built sawmills and exported one of the country's greatest resources – wood. In 1917, more trees were removed from the Wilja region than in the previous twenty years. Crop lands were lying idle in 75% and land assets were largely abandoned.[27] This condition deteriorated as a result of the Polish-Bolshevik war. Consequently, the most devastated areas were found within the borders of Poland.[28]

A significant role was played by agrarian-climatic factors that had a strong impact on the economic situation. These included land fragmentation, agricultural land structure, land quality, low agricultural culture, numerous easement and climatic conditions. As mentioned above, most of the border farms were small, micro-sized, and medium. Small farmers were running natural farms and practically did not participate in the market. They did not have surplus of goods because to a great extent, the products obtained from farms were not enough for year-round maintenance. The effect of such an agrarian structure was the "hunger of the earth" among the poorer part of the rural population and significant disparities in the level of life of peasants and landowners, all leading to social conflicts as a result.

The structure conditioning land use was a factor determining the economic development of a given area. In the case of the north-eastern voivodships, it was not at all favorable. The lands of the North-Eastern Borderlands exceeded the rest of the country by the share of meadows, pastures, forests and another wasteland. Arable land accounted for only 40.8% of the total area. They were largely owned by small and medium-sized

[26] LCVA, UWW, sign. no. 51.5.1542, p. 299.

[27] P. Wróbel, *op. cit*., p. 66; Z. Tomczonek, *Ruch ludowy na Kresach północno-wschodnich Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej,* Warsaw 1996, pp. 18–19.

[28] The mass of postwar destruction in the borderlands is illustrated by the memories of Wincenty Witos, who held the office of the President of the Council of Ministers in the so-called Government of National Unity after the end of the Polish-Bolshevik War, he departed for a visit to the Eastern Border. He writes, "A lot of people on the other side of the Bug River have already emigrated from the retreating Russian army and have not returned yet. Many died of illness and starvation, the rest was in huts and mudflats, living in extreme poverty and hunger. The land lay unused almost everywhere, covered with dense weeds, bushes and several-year-old trees. Here and there they were trying to grub it up. In some villages, there were corpses that nobody had buried. Remains of stoves and chimneys was what had remained of many villages. Newly placed signposts talked about city names and people." W. Witos, *Moje wspomnienia,* edited by E. Karczewski & J. R. Szaflik, vol. 2, Warsaw 1990, p. 154.

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farms. The lands belonging to the great estates included a greater proportion of meadows, pastures, forests and wasteland than in the other parts of the country.[29]

The land of the North-Eastern Borderlands belonged to semi-barren soil. Rye, oats, a small amount of barley and wheat, potatoes, peas, buckwheat and flax were cultivated. Compared to the Poznan Voivodeship, where the quality of the soil was comparable, the yields on the north-eastern lands were almost two times smaller. The reasons for such a great difference are to be found in a very low agricultural culture. In this area, most of the peasant land was cultivated by a three-field system, where one third of the cultivated land was not used. The scale of application of fertilizers was very small and it was more about the earthly property. For small farmers, they were completely unknown. Most of the cultivated land was used for natural fertilizers. The decrease of primitive agricultural tools, the use of which caused soil erosion, and the use of bad cultivars, also contributed to the decline of agricultural culture.[30]

A big problem was posed by the so-called land patchiness. This phenomenon in the North-Eastern Borderlands has reached a large size and it was due to natural growth and succession breakdowns. In 1934, the situation was as follows: 5% of farms consisted of 5 parcels, 10% - from 6 to 10, 65% – from 11 to 20 and 20% – 20 parcels each.[31] The breakdown of arable land had a negative impact on farming and certainly was one of the factors hindering agricultural progress.

Numerous easements (mostly pasture and forest) should be treated a relic of the previous epoch and the remnants of agricultural policy of tsarist Russia. They gave farmers, among other things, the possibility of grazing cattle in the royal lands and collecting firewood, fishing in private water reservoirs.[32] This phenomenon had a rather complex character. On the one hand, the easements were important to a whole range of small peasants, for whom they were often one of the most important sources of livelihood, and on the other hand they were one of the major obstacles to the process of raising the agricultural economy of the region.

Weather conditions were another reason behind the development of the North-Eastern Borderlands. Climate had a negative impact on yields and was a frequent cause of crop failure: it was characterized by lower annual temperatures than in other regions of the country and frequent rainfall and precipitation. The rains were most often intense enough that they resulted in the destruction of entire plots of cultivated land. Lower temperatures shortened the vegetation period. In the years 1928, 1933 and 1936, villages in the north-eastern voivodeships survived the worst crop failures. In 1928, in Vilnius 139,859 people starved according to official data. In 1933, 60% of root crops

[29] *Ziemie północno-wschodnie Rzeczypospolitej. Informator społeczno-gospodarczy m. Wilna oraz województw białostockiego, nowogródzkiego, poleskiego i wileńskiego,* Warsaw 1933, p. 25.

[30] Archives of Modern Records, Vilnius Voivodeship Office [further referred to as: AAN, UWW] sign. no. 946, pp. 20–21.

[31] J. Zaremba, *Stosunki narodowościowe w województwie nowogródzkim z uwzględnieniem tła socjalnego,* Warsaw 1939*,* p. 49.

[32] F. Bossowski, *Służebności gruntowe. Prawo ziem wschodnich,* Warsaw 1939, pp. 4–5.

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were decomposed before harvesting due to abundant precipitation, resulting not only in a shortage of bread but also that of potatoes.[33]

The reasons connected with communication infrastructure were another group of factors that affected the poor economic situation in the north-east lands. The average length of the railway network, which is 4.3 km per 100 square kilometers on average for Poland, for Vilnius was 2.9 km, and for Novogrodek – 2,6.[34] The problem, however, was not due solely to insufficient development of the railway network to economic demand. The basic situation was unfavorable, looking from the perspective of the needs of economic life, the location of these roads. The railway that was built in this area during the partitions was strategically important for Russia, forming part of the railway line connecting Warsaw with major Russian cities. So, the railways of the Vilnius and Novogrodek lands often ran along the border, bypassing the more important urban centers of the region. The best illustration of this state of affairs was the district capital of the country.[35] The area of the North-Eastern Borderlands also experienced a severe lack of hard surface roads. In the Vilnius Voivodship, there were 5.7 km of these roads per 100 km², in Novogrodek – 8 km, with the national average of 15 km per 100 square kilometers.[36] The density of roads in relation to 10 thousand inhabitants was seven times smaller than the average across Poland and eighteen times smaller in comparison to the Pomorskie Voivodeship.[37]

The development of railway networks and roads with hard surface in the border voivodeships in the interwar period was very weak. On the one hand, these lands have been cut off from the markets and sources of raw materials in Russia and, on the other, transport to new markets within the country has been hampered by a poorly developed transport network and not adapted to the needs of other economic conditions. This condition caused the north-eastern voivodships to be partially isolated in economic terms, which in turn was one of the important causes of economic backwardness.

The geographical location of the North-Eastern Borderlands, or their peripheries and border with hostile states (with Lithuania and above all the USSR), was another important condition for economical underdevelopment. Northeast lands were far removed from the centers of state power, industrialized regions of the intensive economy, seaports. This was followed by unused economic relations with the USSR. The historically shaped economic relations of the north-eastern territories with Russia have been broken, and the economic exchange of Poland with the USSR in the interwar period has remained at a very low level.[38] In the area of the Northeastern Border, it was practi-

[33] L. Niewarowicz, *Nieurodzaje w północnej Wileńszczyźnie i akcja zapobiegawcza,* Vilnius 1937, pp. 1–2; *Głód na Wileńszczyźnie w latach 1928–1929,* Warsaw 1931, p. 9.

[34] LCVA, UWW, sign. no. 51.5.1542, p. 301.

[35] *Ibidem.*

[36] E. Rühle, *Ziemie wschodnie w cyfrach i kartogramach,* Warsaw 1939, p. 14.

[37] LCVA, UWW, sign. no. 51.5.1542, p. 302.

[38] J. Tomaszewski, *Polsko-radzieckie stosunki handlowe w latach 1920–1929,* [in:] *Druga Rzeczpospolita. Gospodarka – społeczeństwo – miejsce w świecie (sporne problemy),* edited by Z. Landau & J. Tomaszewski, Warsaw 1977, p. 399–427.

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cally restricted to illegal trade (smuggling). In a situation when new economic relations within the country were built very slowly, this was a serious factor hindering the economic development of these lands.

Representatives of field administrations have been very optimistic in assessing the economic situation of the eastern territories. A quote from the paper titled *The overall economic situation of the Vilnius Voivodeship and the resulting conclusions. From 2. XII. 1935* stated,"[…] significant difficulties are also due to the geographical location of the Vilnius voivodeship (three borders), the diversity of the population (three strong groups of national minorities: Belarusians, Lithuanians and Jews), and the postwar significance and impoverishment of the country through the German occupation (robbery exploitation of forests). There is still lack of communication arteries, caused consciously, due to strategic reasons by former occupying authorities, lack of even initiation of land reclamation works, low level of culture of the population." The following conclusion was drawn: "Only after reconstructing all these difficulties can one realize the greatness of the work already done by the Polish state here and how much effort should be made to increase the condition of the Vilnius voivodship to the level of the voivodships, if not western, then the central ones."[39]

The economy in rural areas of the North-Eastern Borderlands requires analysis of economic processes and intensification of work related to the transformation of agrarian structure in Vilnius and Novogrodek. These were to include parceling, abolition of easements, land consolidation and land improvement.

The need to introduce agricultural reform in this area was enormous. It was supposed to fulfill an important task in the state's economic policy and was one of the most important tools for changing the backward social structure. For the Polish authorities, the implementation of agricultural reforms in the Borderlands was also of political importance, which was connected with the specific ethnic structure of the area. The motives of the state authorities were different. During the implementation by J. Piłsudski of the concept of federation and actions of the Civil Board of the Eastern Territories, the introduction of agricultural reform was supposed to be a means of uniting the Belarusian people[40]. In the mid-twenties, in the face of widespread guerrilla action, it was to be one of the tools for combating banditry[41]. After the May Coup, the agricultural reforms in the north-eastern territories were to fulfill one of the instruments of assimilation policy of the Belarussian population[42].

[39] LCVA, WUW, sign. no. 51.5.1581, „Ogólna sytuacja gospodarcza Województwa Wileńskiego i wypływające stąd wnioski. Z dn. 2. XII. 1935 r.", k. 56.

[40] On Pilsudski's order of May 26, 1919, Jerzy Osmolowski and the officials of the Board of Directors proceeded to draft a bill on agricultural reform based on a resolution of the Parliament of July 10, 1919, to provide a landless and small-holder farmers the possibility of obtaining land. More about this topic was written by K. Gomułka, *Białorusini w II RP, Gdańsk 1992...,* p. 12.

[41] LCVA, Delegat Rządu, sygn. 51.1.18, k. 19.

[42] AAN, MSW, sign. no. 946, p. 45; W. Staniewicz, *Zagadnienie rolnicze ziem wschodnich,* „Droga", 1937, issue no. 4, pp. 34–45.

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The issue of agricultural reform for many years has been a very propaganda element in the policies of the authorities in the borderlands. However, this did not translate into practical actions. The process of subdivision in the North-Eastern Borderlands was very slow and there were many difficulties. Among the most important are: limitation of parcels purchased by the local population; financial obstacles and formal requirements which were difficult to meet, especially for the poorer part of the local peasants of Belarusian nationality, hampering the process of private land subdivision; limitation of buyers of parcels to Polish citizens, which in the case of many Belarusians not having their proof of identity was impossible[43].

In this case, military settlements were also important. In fact, columns of settlers took over the lands as early as 1921, when formally the parcel action in the north-eastern lands began properly in 1924. They received land often for free (well-deserved in the war), and also received aid for development. The size of the settlement plot depended on the quality of the soil - in this area, plots in the size of 15 to 25 ha predominated.[44] It may be estimated that about 70,000 hectares of land were distributed. At the same time, in the area of Vilnius and Novogrodek voivodships, 436,500 ha were subdivided between 80,821 peasants (in conversion, parcels to 5 ha).[45] It is hardly surprising that the local population treated the settlers in a hostile way, as a serious competitor to take over the land that the colonists often rented, speculated on it, and left unused.[46]

As a result of the poorly progressing subdivision movement, the number of farms subject to fragmentation increased, and the dissatisfaction of the small-scale Belarusian population increased. The scarcity of land forced the inhabitants of this region to seek other sources of livelihood, and often for earning emigration.[47]

One of the important factors in the overall work on the redevelopment of the agricultural system of this region was the liquidation of easements. According to the Act of January 10, 1922, they were abolished based on a voluntary arrangement of parties or ex officio by way of coercion. The landowners were most likely to apply for easement liquidation, for whom the solutions adopted in this law were favorable. For small land-

[43] K. Gomułka, *op. cit.,* p. 12.

[44] J. Stobniak-Smogorzewska, *Osadnictwo wojskowe na Kresach Wschodnich, [in:] Z Kresów Wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej. Wspomnienia z osad wojskowych 1921–1940,* H. Łappo (ed.), London 1992, p. 14.

[45] Z. Zaporowski, *Stosunki polityczno-społeczne...,* p. 50.

[46] From the speech of the Head of the Security Department of the Novogrodek Voivodeship Office, Jarecki at the Conference of March 10, 1927: "[...] sentiment towards settlers is hostile. From a political point of view, settlement is undesirable. The local population is always hostile and is of the opinion that their land is taken by settlers." AAN, UWW, sign. no. 978/7,"The protocol of the conference held on March 10, 1927 in the Vilnius Voivodeship Office in matters concerning the lighting of the political situation in Eastern voivodeships in connection with the current instructions and regulations on cover and mobilization", p. 3.

[47] Since 1926 there has been a wave of labor migration from this area, among others to Latvia. The culmination of this process was in the mid-thirties. Zob. B. Kopiec, *Wychodźstwo sezonowe z ziemi Wileńskiej do Łotwy,* Vilnius 1938, p. 24; W. Ormicki, *Struktura demograficzna wychodźstwa sezonowego z Ziemi Wileńskiej,* Warsaw 1938, pp. 15–25.

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owners who could graze or farm cattle on large pastures, the equivalent proposed by the legislature, in the form of a small piece of poor soil, was by no means sufficient to continue the breeding. The situation of the peasants in the light of this solution, with the poorly progressing subdivision and land consolidation processes, was extremely unfavorable, and the whole campaign became a conflict between the landlords and the minor landowners.[48]

In 1927, in order to speed up the process, the President of the Republic of Poland issued a regulation to abolish servitude. The new regulations introduced many simplifications to reduce the formalities and shorten the time of liquidation of easements, and to reduce the conflicts between small tenants and landlords. In order to encourage peasants to liquidate easements, material benefits were also provided. Despite the facilitation and incentives that this regulation introduced, the process of liquidating easements was not completed. On the eve of World War Two, in the lands of the north-eastern Polish state, there were still households burdened with servitude.[49]

In the repair of the agricultural structure, the role of grazing was to play an important role, i.e. to merge the land remaining in the chessboard. In the north-eastern provinces, the process was slower than in other parts of the country. The pace was related primarily to the reluctance of small peasants who often did not see the need for these activities. The merging operation involved the sharing of common meadows and pastures, and sometimes the relocation of business buildings to another area. In the situation when the landlords had a labor surplus and were unable to count on the enlargement of the farm, diversification meant losing the possibility of further existence. Another factor hampering diversification was the lack of finances as land consolidation was made for a fee. Process costs and expenses associated with the relocation of farms have caused debt for the peasants and ruined small farms. The action of land consolidation in Vilnius and Novgorodek was also hampered by the slowly progressing liquidation of easements.[50]

Irrigation works were generally carried out on the land being consolidated. This process began in the area of the Northeastern Borderlands after 1921, but it was most significant in the years 1926-1928. Due to financial reasons, consolidation was mainly performed by larger farms. Minor owners sporadically used the possibility of drainage of marshy areas or hydration or afforestation of their lands. The economic crisis has hindered the implementation of land improvement work. High irrigation costs were another factor contributing to the increase in farmers' debt. At the end of the twenties, the melioration process was totally inhibited. Works resumed at the end of 1933. The last decade of the interwar period was characterized by a very slow irrigation rate that did not extend to small farms[51].

[48] K. Gomułka, *op. cit*., pp. 17–18.
[49] *Ibidem*, p. 19.
[50] *Ibidem,* pp. 19–20.
[51] *Ibidem,* p. 21.

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From an economic point of view, all of these processes, which were the basis of the agricultural policy of the Polish state on the redevelopment of agricultural structures, were all equally valid and difficult. The financial condition of the state was a decisive factor in the success of these processes. Considering that it was impossible in the Polish realities at the time, they avoided much of the small peasant farms in the area. At the same time, a positive natural increase was the cause of the increase in the number of farms reducing their area from the point of view of a single farm. The growing number of people making a living from agriculture (increased population density) has led to the impoverishment of the contemporary Borderland village. So, the landlords could not make a living from agriculture and were looking for other activities.

4. Summary

Given the specific characteristics of the area, the North-West Borderlands had a very unfavorable start in the interwar period, while the identified historical, structural and agrarian-climatic reasons significantly impeded their development. This situation required a well-thought and consistently implemented economic policy of the Polish state over these lands and considerable financial investments. The changes taking place in the economy of the Northeastern Borderlands during the interwar period were complex. In the countryside, there was a process of transforming the backward agrarian structure. However, they were determined by the very difficult situation of agriculture, burdened with huge, nationwide, civilization delays and the effects of warfare, and the overpopulation of villages. In this state of affairs, the processes of pauperization of the population, fragmentation of rural households and the general economic stagnation were in progress. Such directions of change were determined by both unfavorable conditions characteristic of this particular district of the country as well as phenomena specific to the entire state. Under conditions where the overall economic situation in Poland was very unfavorable, finances for various undertakings nationwide were lacking, and the problems to be resolved were rather increasing than decreasing, decreasing in the economic development of the north-eastern territories were virtually insurmountable.

Abstract: The North-Eastern Borderlands of the Republic of Poland in the interwar period were the most economically and socially backward area, often called 'Poland B'. It was primarily a rural region that significantly shaped the social and economic landscape of the area. The purpose of the article was to define and evaluate individual elements of the socio-economic backwardness of the rural areas in the North-Eastern Borderlands of the Second Republic of Poland. With the exception that the concept of socio-economic backwardness will be considered as an antonym of the concept of socio-economic development. Unlike the latter, which has a positive dimension and is included in the context of progress, the concept of backwardness is a determinant of reference to the category of backwardness, outdatedness, non-modernity and anachronism. In the case of the concept of backwardness, by analogy with the concept of development, the social aspect is a complementary feature of the economic approach, and vice versa, economic backwardness does not occur in isolation from the backwardness

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of the social structure. These two groups of factors will be the main sources of the research analysis, where the social approach will be analyzed in the group of specific terrain properties that significantly affected the image of the civilization backwardness in this area, while the conditions and economic processes will be covered separately. Such a presentation of the topic will give the opportunity for a broader perspective and a more in-depth analysis.
Keywords: North-Eastern Borderlands of the Republic of Poland, interwar period, economic backwardness, rural areas.

Zacofanie społeczno-gospodarcze na obszarach wiejskich Kresów Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej

Streszczenie: Kresy Północno-Wschodnie Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej okresu międzywojennego były terenem najbardziej zacofanym gospodarczo i społecznie, często nazywanym Polską. Był to teren przede wszystkim obszarów wiejskich w istotny sposób kształtujących krajobraz społeczny i gospodarczy terenu. Celem artykułu było zdefiniowanie oraz ocena poszczególnych elementów zacofania społeczno-gospodarczego obszarów wiejskich Kresów Północno-Wschodnich II RP. Z tym, że pojęcie zapóźnienia społeczno-gospodarczego będzie rozpatrywane jako antonim pojęcia „rozwój społeczno-gospodarczy". W odróżnieniu od tego ostatniego, które ma wymiar pozytywny i ujmowane jest w kontekście postępu, pojęcie „zapóźnienia" jest wyznacznikiem odwołania się do kategorii zacofania, przestarzałości, nienowoczesności oraz anachroniczności. W przypadku pojęcia zapóźnienia, analogicznie do ujęcia pojęcia rozwoju, aspekt społeczny stanowi komplementarną cechę ujęcia gospodarczego i na odwrót zacofanie gospodarcze nie następuje w oderwaniu od zacofania struktury społecznej. Te dwie grupy czynników będą stanowić główne źródła analizy badawczej. Z tym że ujęcie społeczne przeanalizowano w grupie specyficznych właściwości terenu, które w sposób zasadniczy wpłynęły na obraz zapóźnień cywilizacyjnych tego terenu, a uwarunkowania oraz procesy gospodarcze zostaną ujęte odrębnie. Takie przedstawienie tematu da możliwość szerszej perspektywy oraz głębszej analizy.
Słowa kluczowe: Kresy Północno-Wschodnie Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, okres międzywojenny, zacofanie gospodarcze, obszary wiejskie

Социально-экономическая отсталость в сельской местности на северо-восточной окраинах Второй Речи Посполитой

Аннотация: Северо-восточные приграничные районы Польской Республики в межвоенный период были наиболее экономически и социально отсталыми, часто называемыми "Польшей Б" (второй категории). Целью статьи было определить и оценить отдельные элементы социально-экономической отсталости сельских районов северо-восточных окраин Второй Речи Посполитой. Концепция социально-экономической отсталости, в данном случае, будет рассматриваться как антоним концепции социально-экономического развития. В отличие от последнего, который имеет позитивное измерение и включен в контекст прогресса, концепция отсталости является определяющим фактором для ссылки на категорию отсталости, устаревания, немодности и анахронизма. В случае концепции отсталости, по аналогии с концепцией развития, социальный аспект является дополнительным признаком экономического подхода, и, наоборот,

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экономическая отсталость не возникает в отрыве от отсталости социальной структуры. Эти две группы факторов станут основными источниками анализа исследований. Такое представление темы даст возможность для более широкой перспективы и более глубокого анализа.
Ключевые слова: северо-восточные окраины РП, межвоенный период, экономическая отсталость, сельская местность.

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