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## CONTEXTS OF THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCH LIFE IN THE CULTURAL SYSTEM OF MINORITIES

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the colonization process of the Lowland by the Slovak ethnic group, with an emphasis on the role of the Church/priest in forming cultural patterns in newly populated areas. The priest often led the colonists into their new homeland. He was their key to solving problems that arose in a geographically and ethno-culturally diverse setting. The paper also contains a chapter on the complexity of the correlations between religion and ethnicity that emerged from mutual relations between immigrants and indigenous people. The cultural development of Catholic colonists was different from Lutherans who arrived into the Catholic or Orthodox environment. Such contrasts and differences have often contributed to the preservation of faith and ethnicity for many generations. To these days, they significantly influence the process of assimilation and the preservation of ethnic/confessional identity.

*Keywords:* human, natural environment, cultural system, religion, ethnic minority

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### **1. Introduction**

The article discusses the question why active individuals were tolerated or even supported by their minority communities, and why especially priests and teachers became so important in the society. Our aim is to reflect several contexts of the culture of Slovak ethnic minorities in various locations in the Lowland. We also deal with the relations between individual states, national minorities and ethnic groups on their territory. Special attention is paid to religious aspects of life in minority communities. During the colonization and initial formation of minority ethno-cultural systems, people needed capable individuals, especially priests. (One of the most important characteristics of the nation and also a unique factor in the formation of ethnic identity is culture. If minority communities differ in ethnic and cultural specificities, we use the term ‚ethno-cultural‘ to describe them.) In many cases, religious affiliation served as an ethnic symbol and created a certain ethno-cultural/ethno-confessional border.

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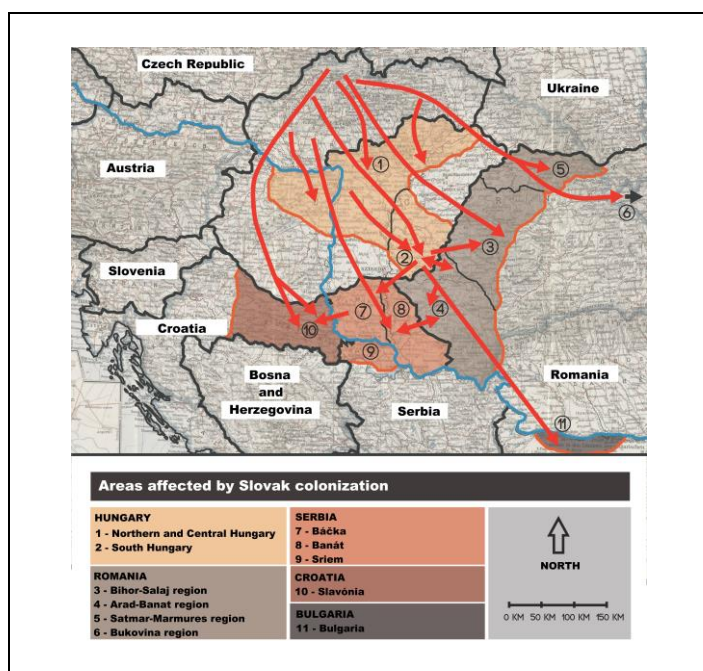
Confessional identity also strongly determines (accelerates or slows down) the process of ethnic assimilation.

The concept of confessional identity is synonymous with the consciousness of religious affiliation. In Lowland area according to the Roman Catholic confession or Evangelical Augsburg confession, the religion can be evangelical or Catholic. It explains who I am, to which group I belong to and from whom we are different. The term confession/confessionality is a general term for expressing religious affiliation, belief, but also for the depth of religious belief, the power of faith and religion. For example, only the Slovak Evangelical Religious Community was known in the 1960s in Butin (Romania), after the arrival of the Roman Catholics from Bihor (also the Slovaks). There is also the Slovak Evangelical and Slovak Roman Catholic community. The Slovaks have a religious (=confessional) identity according to the religion.

## 2. Methodology

The paper offers some conclusions and results from literature studies and multiple field studies performed by authors of this article between 1994 and 2017 in the multicultural area of the Lowland. There are several publications dealing with the issue from various perspectives. Ethno-cultural and ethno-confessional minorities in the southern and south-eastern regions in former Hungary were discussed in the book by Auerhan [1]. He described Czech and Slovak settlements in Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. R. Urban wrote a book about the *Czechoslovaks in Romania* [2]. After World War II, it was e.g. Bednárik who published a book about the *Slovaks in Yugoslavia* [3]; Sirácky - *Slovaks in the World* [4] or a collective work *Atlas of Folk Culture of the Slovaks in Romania* [5]. Štefanko published a monograph *About the Slovaks in Romania* [6]. One of the most recent publications is *The Anabasis* by M. Babiak [7]. Various methodologies, analyses and interpretations related to the research of ethnic minorities in the studied area are mentioned in a number of expert articles and publications by the authors of this study. We can mention *Lowland reflections on non-farming professions* [8], *Cultural traditions in Erdevík* [9], *Pivnica – Cultural traditions of the Slovaks in Bačka* [10], *Boľovce – Cultural traditions of the Slovaks in Syrmia* [11], *Silbaš – Cultural traditions of the Slovaks in Bačka* [12], *Soľany – Cultural traditions of the Slovaks in Slavonia* [13], *Vojlovica – Cultural traditions of the Slovaks in Banat* [14]. Concerning the issue of the Slovaks in Romania, we have published two monographs: *Borumlak and Varzaľ – Lifestyle and Culture of the Slovaks in Bihor* [15] and *Butín – Cultural traditions of the Slovaks in Romanian Banat*. [16]. The last mentioned monograph refers to the work by Tomescu-Matau about the village Gataia in Temes area [17]. Many inspiring insights can also be found in a number of publications discussing the issue from other social and economic perspectives, e.g. William Safran [18] or A. Barszczewska and L. Peti [19].

In many publications from the environment of Slovak enclaves in the Lowland, there are notes on a significant impact of priests and teachers on cultural, educational and national activities. Vojvodina priests and teachers were mapped by V. Valentík [20] or P. Kováč [21]. Alžbeta Nobiková described her personal experience gained as an Evangelical priest [22]. Anna Divičanová [23, 24] pointed out the importance of the Evangelical Church during the formation of the Lowland cultural model. Historic, economic, social and political conditions after the Ottoman expansion indicate why immigrants were mostly Lutherans of Augsburg confession. Educational, cultural and progressive activities of many Evangelical priests, e.g. Samuel Tešedík Jr. in Sarvaš, are generally well-known. However, the Slovak general public and professionals often forget a quality work by Vít Ušák (and the Catholic Church) who published a book *Slovaks in Croatia* [25]. Little attention is paid to the Slovaks and Ruthenians members of the Eastern religion – Greek Catholics and Orthodox, who also moved to Serbia and Romania in the period of re-catholization to seek religious freedom. Valuable insights related to the issue are mentioned in the article by Kondrla and Repar [26], which focuses on postmodern aspects of religious changes. Although they do not primarily deal with the Lowland Slovaks, they describe postmodern changes of thinking with an emphasis on religion. A philosophical view on the objective faith and truth is given by Kondrla and Torok [27], and Králik [28]. The issue of traditional religion and alternative religiosity in Slovakia in the context of majority-minority relations is analysed in the book by S. Letavajová [29].



**Figure 1.** A brief overview of the moves of the Slovaks in different periods and directions [30, p. 20].

### **3. What is the Lowland and why it was colonized by the Slovaks?**

The term Lowland refers to the territory situated south of the Slovak Republic (Figure 1). These are the areas in the south of Hungary, western Romania, northern Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia [31]. This name also applies to the mountainous territories of northern Hungary and north-western Romania, despite the fact that they do not have a lowland character. The reason is that the historical development and ethnic processes in these areas are contextually and logically linked to the overall concept of the Lowland [32]. The Lowland is mostly associated with the Slovaks and it was colonized after the defeat of the Turks in Vienna (1683) and their expulsion from the country. The devastation of many regions stimulated the colonization process [31, p. 179]. Until the collapse of the Hungarian monarchy in 1918, the administrative territorial units of today's Slovakia were named 'Upper-Hungarian regions', the Upper land [7, p. 9]. The Upper land and the Lowland can be considered as opposed from this historical and geographical perspective.

The origin and existence of each ethnic enclave or diaspora is accompanied by various causes and a various complex of circumstances. There are many specific cases with a different decisive motive for the departure. We can mention inability to feed the family due to a small amount of land, infertile land, famine, desire for religious freedom, war conflicts, disagreement with the political situation, political persecution, family disagreements, escape, studies, adventure [33]. It is possible to list a number of reasons, but certainly not all of them. This variability is caused by different or even similar influences, which appear in different geographic, social, cultural, ethnic and confessional settings, with different history and collective memory. All this can lead to a paradoxical situation where similar or even the same effects can cause different reactions.

### **4. How did the culture and way of life of individuals and communities change in a new environment**

Principles of traditional agricultural systems in Slovakia, which had been preserved in isolated mountain areas until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, were different from those of the communities of Slovak enclaves in the Lowland. One of the most important features of the traditional environment was conformism, uniformity and unconditional respect for traditional cultural practices. People were bound by the tradition and it 'forced' them to follow only traditional and customary ways. On the other hand, it made their life much easier. Each question had the right answer, verified by the generations. But the Lowland enclaves were much more dynamic, just after their initial formation in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was no space for passivity and conformity. Communities needed creative and active individuals. The uniqueness was not punished or neglected by the society. Strong individuals were needed to solve new problems, to cope with new conditions and to effectively use opportunities that were completely unknown to them.

Each Slovak Lowland enclave has a different location and a specific population structure. All of them maintain and develop their own unique cultural patterns that were brought by their ancestors ten or twelve generations before. Certain differences also arise as a result of various economic and cultural contacts with the majority nation and neighbouring ethnic groups with different ethno-cultural and religious characteristics. There are many causes of both similar and different features.

For instance, the minority culture can be affected by the character of the colonization process. There are different consequences of one massive colonization stream and a multi-stage colonization process that could last decades. The long journey from northern regions to the new home resulted in many tragedies – not only death, but also the separation of closest relatives and family members. Many migrants left their homeland to find religious freedom or a better social and economic situation. But even in the time when they started building new dwellings, farm buildings, churches and schools, they had no security and certainty. Sometimes, their landlords would find them and take them back.

These contexts help us better understand the values, the way of thinking and the psychological state of the colonists. They left their homeland and arrived to a new country with various expectations, different mental and cultural background and a different ability to experience and solve unexpected situations. They had to adapt in an unfamiliar environment, they learned how to cope with unknown conditions and how to get along with people speaking in different languages (Romanian, German, Serbian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, and Hebrew) and of various religions (Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, Muslim).

An individual can be perceived as part of a wider social and cultural system existing under specific geographical conditions. He/she is taught during the whole life and applies similar processes in similar situations. Traditions provide cultural stability and human security. Colonists without previous knowledge of migration had no experience about the formation of new cultural patterns and standards. In the previous system, there was a response already prepared to answer every question. Now they had to fulfil non-standard tasks without pre-established or verified recipes.

But on the other hand, they suddenly had the opportunity to express their personality and creativity. It was not only allowed, but even required to create something new, rather than to reproduce old things. Arriving in a new environment with new conditions required new solutions. Many practices that had been brought from their home country turned out to be out of date, dysfunctional, and inapplicable. Colonists did not come from one place, so some cultural values appeared in several alternative variants. If they were usable, the new settlers had to choose the most appropriate ones. Collective standards were based on individual or group principles, where there were different views on what is best. Existing cultural elements were strictly selected. In this context, we can apply Michalik's models of the acculturation processes at ethno-cultural

borders within the primary, secondary and tertiary colonization [31, p. 69–80]. It is necessary to point out that even the cultural elements that were considered 'ours' were not always unified and consistent.

### **5. Contexts of the Church life in the minority cultural system, with an emphasis on the impact of the nature and cultural landscape in the new environment**

People, work and culture make a kind of relationship circle. They interact with one another and oppose each other. Natural landscape/cultural landscape is an essential part of human life. It is a space in which we are offered certain possibilities for life. Within these opportunities, we work, live and transform the natural environment. Human cannot do it alone, but only as a member of the community. A unique complex of nature background and creative work in a specific area creates a unique coexistence of people, society and culture. Culture is a way of 'cultivating' nature. It is also a mirror that shows us how nature conquered the human being and what nature allowed us to do within its borders. Nature is a frame of human spirituality. It offers choices of solving particular situations and provides limits, activities, experience, knowledge and consciousness. If individuals, families, relatives, neighbours or other groups decided to exceed the horizon of their current opportunities to find a new place and new tools to meet their needs, they usually migrate to the new environment. It is nothing new in the history of mankind. When migrants left their homes, they had to leave their natural, social and cultural environment from which they were dependent since their birth. Their ancestors built houses, farm buildings, worked in fields, cut meadows, and dug wells. In one day, migrants lost their relatives, neighbours, friends, and they left the spirit that remained 'materialized' in the cultural landscape. At home, they were all taught to perform tasks that matched their social status.

After migration, these social roles usually changed and people often felt helpless in new tasks. Everyday life brought the need to solve new problems and forced people to experiment. Before leaving, they knew their surroundings in detail, but suddenly they came to the unknown, they lost their sense of security. They did not have the support points for their work. They experienced the new rhythm of nature. The Sun measured time in another way. Sunrise and sunset changed their time and place. Winter began at another time, spring was announced by unknown birds. Shattered people from the mountains learned to walk upright on a flat land. The usual calendars and weather proverbs proved to be useless. There was no need to own a grubbing hoe or a two-sided saw. Mining buckets remained leaning against the wall of the barn or a corn drier. There was a different stove with other burning material. From other flour, bread was made. Every day and festive life has changed. This was no gradual modification, it was a sudden innovation of the core cultural system itself. From day to day, the function and the value of objects changed. This has been a breakthrough moment in many areas of culture, in all its categories. Verified traditional practices ceased to be valid. They had to be replaced by

improvisation, yet still generally accepted, shared and used. Migrants without a complex process of socialization in the new cultural system were desperately looking for help and security.

The preacher of the God's Word, who often came with the colonists, felt and experienced these changes less intensely. Perhaps it was because he was educated and, compared to other colonists, less influenced by the earthly material world, less dependent on it and mentally more balanced. Surrounding objects, social situations and everyday life in the service of God and the Church were quite similar to those in his old home. And besides, he was not so dependent on nature, traditional work, place and the local community as the farmers who came with him. It was usual that, from time to time, priests changed the place of their service and very rarely spent their whole life in the same village. If migrants left their home country for religious purposes (for example, almost all Lutherans from northern regions or Eastern Orthodox migrants), the social importance of priests has increased even more. They were educated and ordinary people were expecting comfort and help from them. After the enormous 'earthquake' in the cultural system after which traditional practices ceased to exist, faith and the church, represented by the priest, were the only things that remained stable. In addition to pastoral activity, people asked for advice on farming, family life, relatives and social relationships. Our multiple studies of the minority systems of the Slovaks in the Lowland definitely confirmed that the role of priests was irreplaceable. Priests recorded basic data on the born, the baptized, the married and the buried. They informed us about all ordinary and exceptional events in the Church. In church books, chronicles and documents, we can find direct information about the Church, diasporas, ethnic and confessional enclaves, as well as their contacts with other ethnic and religious communities. The personality, involvement and enthusiasm of the priest significantly affected the formation of ethno-confessional society in rural or urban environments, as well as the collective memory. The personality, involvement and enthusiasm of the priest significantly affected the formation of specific society in rural or urban environments, as well as the collective memory. Registers are an irreplaceable reflection of the Church life and the parish office, and undoubtedly a good source to appreciate the importance of priests in the past and present. People are still following and evaluating their God's servant, even though it is more than two hundred years after colonization. The work of the priest and the state of the Church are mutually interdependent.

## **6. The priest and his influence on the formation of a local community of Slovaks in a new environment.**

The creation of new social and economic relationships has also led to the regrouping of positions in the local community hierarchy. This was a significant shift of individual and family statuses that were now formed in other conditions. The ability to implement optimal solutions depended on the number of individuals, from the level of family, neighbours, religious, professional or

generational groups with different/similar ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Opportunities were available for ambitious, smart and capable individuals. After arriving to the Lowland, an admirable number of personalities emerged in the newly established Slovak communities – priests, teachers, farmers and craftsmen with remarkable professional and managerial skills, politicians, scientists, writers, artists, singers, theatre directors and actors. Various publications such as *Dejiny starého Nadlaku, Sto rokov divadla v Pivnici* [34] or other representative books are a clear evidence of this phenomenon. Traditional agrarian societies and social conditions in the Upper Hungary would not allow them to fully develop their creative abilities and intellectual wealth – this also applies to many priests. Evolving cultural systems offered new opportunities, they needed creative inventions. Well-known figures and personalities have uniquely labelled villages and towns with their own creative ‘seal’. However, social control mechanisms were developing at the same time. Because the enclave only works if it is aimed at biological and cultural reproduction, if individuals are willing to follow the rules (because they need the group), or if the community as a whole is able to exert enough social pressure on them.

The greater the openness of the enclave, the greater the danger of weakening its structures. This tendency speeds up the process of transforming the system into diaspora. Proximity of the urban environment and regular departures from the local community are a precondition for individualism and leaving the network of traditions and conformism. But even such a situation does not have to be dangerous for the preservation of original cultural ties and ethnic consciousness, if there are capable personalities (often priests) who are willing to offer their best and are able to mobilize people to act. It is not important whether the reward is a self-realization, success, pride or just the feeling of reaching a good purpose. Their presence/absence can cause many cultural disproportions or even specific psychological and personal features typical for members of a certain minority community. Overall passivity and resignation on national goals on one side, as well as the high involvement, selfless friendliness and goodwill on the other side, a strong sense of ethnic consciousness and its presentation, or any other characteristics are NOT accidental – they always have their roots and unique contexts preserved by the socialization. If there are no capable personalities in the minority communities, e.g. organizers of social activities, all activities are falling sharply. Along with this, the sense of community based on ethnicity weakens - not only within a specific village/town, but also in external relations. The general consciousness of nationality is weakening. It is up to the local community to decide whether it wants such activities, such individuals and whether people are willing to give them space, motivation and support to achieve common benefit.



## **7. Deportation of Germans after World War II and its impact on the confessional and cultural development of ethnic enclaves**

After the departure of Germans and the arrival of immigrants with different ethnic, confessional, cultural and economic parameters (Romanians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bosnians) to former German settlements in Vojvodina, Romania, Hungary and partly Croatia, the inter-ethnic hierarchy has changed. In most cases, the Slovaks had to cope with the new/higher ranking given to them without their own interest of effort.

On the other hand, the departure of German citizens also meant the departure of a strong and respected minority that, e.g. in the Serbian or Romanian Orthodox environment, mostly participated in the promotion of minority rights at ethnic and confessional level. The Slovaks in *Erdevik* (a region in the south of Vojvodina in Serbia) claim that their rich cultural and social life was mostly encouraged by Germans, but also Serbs and Hungarians who were their 'rivals' in a certain sense. After this particular historical moment, the Slovaks were put in a position in which only they were responsible for the quality of minority problems.

The situation after the departure of Germans was different in individual villages and regions. It was mostly dependent on the previous social structure – the number of Slovak communities, the spatial distance from other Slovak, Ruthenian, Czech, Romanian and other localities, and the effort/capacity for the independence of the local minority. For example, the inhabitants of *Butin* in Banat, Romania, behaved very pragmatically during the inter-war period. After the division of Banat by state borders during the World War I, they lost intense contacts with Slovak enclaves, especially in today's Serbian Banat and Bačka. They were able to react quickly and 'replaced' it with the cooperation with the Germans from their own village and neighbouring settlements. Ethnic or local endogamy was not considered a significant issue at that time. However, the departure of Germans meant a sudden problem and the Slovak community needed some time to cope it. Economic, social and cultural relations disrupted before World War II were not consolidated yet. Certain unpleasant circumstances arose and 20% of the population from *Butin* departed to Czechoslovakia in the forties. Even though the number was not so high, it was an important moment for a low-birth village of the Evangelical population. They lost their ability to perform biological and cultural reproduction. Moreover, the establishment of joint agricultural cooperative structures definitely stopped any attempts to restore the functioning traditional cultural systems.

## **8. Religion and ethnicity – different countries, different development**

Confessional and ethnic characteristics indicate various groups with different parameters. Within the coexistence of the minority and the majority population, they sometimes are of different meaning, sometime synonymous. In *Nadlak* (Arad region) or *Butin* (Romanian Banat), every Lutheran is Slovak and

the Evangelical church is Slovak. The man of Orthodox faith is considered Romanian in *Čerpotok* (Transylvanian Ore Mountains) and Serbian in *Kovačica* (Vojvodina Banat). Ethnic and confessional identities can be the same and are often substitutable or changeable in real life. In *Butín*, adjectives Slovak/Evangelical/Lutheran, respectively Romanian/Orthodox were considered synonymous until the sixties. When the Catholic Slovaks from Bihor moved to Butín, this rule ceased to be valid. In *Selenča* (Báčka region in Vojvodina), there are two Slovak churches – Evangelical and Catholic, so the religion definitely also refers to the ethnic differentiation from the Orthodox Serbs. In Transdanubia (western Hungary, between the Danube River and the Austrian border) and eastern Slavonia, the Slovaks are usually Catholics, as well as Hungarians and Croats – in this case, ethnic and confessional identity are not substitutable. However, the situation in the Croatian village of *Markovac* is different – the Slovaks are Roman Catholics (descendants of migrants from north-western Slovakia) and in *Solany* (*Soljani*), the Slovaks are both Lutherans and Roman Catholics. There are many more other variants of the identity contexts. For example, in *Biele Blato* (*Belo Blato*, Vojvodina-Serbia), national and confessional identity are not synonymous, because Hungarians, Germans and Slovaks are Lutherans, but at the same time, Hungarians, Germans, Slovaks and Bulgarians are also Roman Catholics.

The Slovak population in several Lowland localities is neither Lutheran nor Roman Catholic. There are the Baptists and Nazarenes, who call themselves *faithful*, but are not organized on ethnic principle (such as Vojvodina or Slavonia Lutherans or Roman-Catholics in *Selenča*). Their worship is performed in Serbian language. Their religious practices bring certain limitations in social life. Customary traditions are usually preserved only within special family and calendar events. On the other hand, we also noticed here some activities, encouraging the Slovak ethnic identity, which are not performed in Evangelical or Catholic environment (e.g. joint baptisms for children, meetings of baptismal youngsters in *Pivnica* or *Silbaš*).

## 9. Conclusions

Confessionality is a determining factor in the way of life and culture, as well as the important context of ethnic identity. After the Turkish expansion, southern regions of the Hungarian monarchy were populated by the Slovaks from northern areas. They were looking for more appropriate living conditions and religious freedom. In our paper, we dealt with confessionality, which accelerated or, in other cases, slowed down the process of ethnic assimilation. It all depends on relations and confessional parameters of the majority population towards minorities, the legal system and the way people think. Nowhere in the world can we find identical situations and conditions. There is always a specific situation without generally valid rules. Due to advancing science and technology, a technocratic society appears [35], which is one of the main factors influencing the quality of life, transport options, media - these are all factors

influencing the ethnic identity. Ethnic minority members may have their own identity modelled purposefully – in accordance with their needs and an effort to avoid being disadvantaged. It is not the same thing to be a minority member in Poland, Hungary, Romania or Slovakia. Each country has its own strategy of minority rights, own minority policy in its territory and abroad, and more or less intentional assimilation of minorities. And every minority also has its own requirements and ideas about its rights towards the majority state, but also different options to apply them in practice. Development is not even and consistent. Relations and lifestyle standards are changing. New states are founded, other ones ceased to exist. Borders change, bilateral relations change. At this level, also inter-ethnic relationships are modified. It is not possible to analyse the culture and the status of ethnic minorities without taking these aspects into account. These changes happen slowly, but sometimes extremely fast. From day to day, new situations, which were considered impossible or absurd yesterday, appear. No one expected them to even come.

Traditional sources of income and related economic activities are only one of the prerequisites for preserving the ethno-cultural system - without a sufficient population and biological reproduction, intergenerational transfer of cultural patterns in all categories, including necessary social control, it is not possible. Current globalization and other factors affect the lower interest of the younger generation in confessionality and ethnicity. Religious affiliation was one of the decisive factors that guaranteed the survival of **some** Slovak enclaves in the Lowland. It is now a big question - how this reduced interest of young people in religion (as well as the priest as a bearer of Slovak identity and culture) will affect the Slovak enclaves in Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Croatia.

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