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Sorbian national strivings between primordialism and (post)modernism

When the modern era nations in Europe were being constituted at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of what is, today, called *primordialism* (*essentialism, objectivism*) was used. In this context, the nation (or rather the ethnic group, according to the current academic terminology) is considered an objectively existing “primordial” category, an indubitable value, a predetermined (ascribed) fixed cultural phenomenon and, therefore, an entity to be adored as a sanctum and other values made subject to it. In this respect ethnicity is conceived of as a dominant element of collective identity superior to other social patterns or situational identities constructed in a “non-ethnic” way.

Although French historian Ernest Renan gave the frequently quoted definition: “*The nation is an everyday plebiscite*”¹ as early as 1882, primordialist concept of the nations and ethnicity dominated the scene well into the 20th century. Only in its second half it started to be gradually replaced with the concept of *constructivism* (*modernism, subjectivism*). According to its adherents the present-day form of ethnic consciousness came into existence only recently (about 200 years ago) in connection with a number of cultural, social and economic factors and changes. This *option to get socially organized* can thus be viewed as an imaginary, abstract and comparative social construct.

Even though nowadays constructivist attitudes and paradigms clearly dominate the sphere of humanities, it does not mean that the primordialist concept of ethnicity and ethnic phenomena has faded away. To the contrary: this concept exhibits strong moments and residua showing both in everyday life of the emotional tie of ethnic loyalties (referred to as *banal nationalism*)² and in pathetic moments when historical and political changes (e.g. disintegration of Yugoslavia and others) occur. It is often just this level of emotions and sentiments³ (only seemingly overcome) which keeps carrying ethnic communities on from century to century.

Traditional concept

While in western Europe the modern era concept of “the nation” and “nationalism” was dominated mainly by the state (or citizen) principle, in eastern Europe, due to different political conditions, the idea of the nation based, in Herderian terms, on the common language, cultural features and national character (*Volksgeist*) prevailed. The endeavours of the Sorbian national revival of the 19th century also started from the language and culture based model of the nation. In defining itself in relation to the German element, the Sorbian endeavours closely resembled those of the Czech national revival,

¹ RENAN, Ernest: *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (a lecture delivered at Paris Sorbonna on 11. March 1882).

² BILLIG, Michael: *Banal Nationalism*. London 1995: Sage Publications.

³ In compliance with the concepts of „ethnic sentiments“ in works by anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

which set an important example for the Sorbs: ironically, they both copied or imitated the German national efforts.⁴

In agreement with the contemporary paradigms, it was almost an exemplary primordialist concept of the existence of “the Sorbian nation”. Unlike the big “state” nations, the minority ethnic group carrying out self-reflection had to cope with some weaknesses of the objectivistically conceived theory resulting from its rigid and static nature. This (in contrast to the ways dominating the practical life of the majority nations) concerned, for example, the fact that the intergenerational linguistic and ethnic transfer was not a thing taken for granted in minority populations – see, e.g. prose writing by Jakub Bart-Ćišinski „Narodowc a wotrodzenc“ (*A Patriot and a Renegade*) of 1879 – or that mixed marriages and identities of the offsprings gave rise to unexpected problems.

Yet we can claim that the primordial approach to the Sorbian ethnicity prevailed almost all over the 20th century. This phenomenon, however, was only insufficiently reflected among experts; rather, it seemed to be a prolonged 19th century ideal of generations passing on the language and ethnic consciousness.

The GDR period can then be divided into two phases:

1) In the first phase spanning between the 1950s and 1970s, the situation in the social sciences of the country was not favourably inclined towards supporting the study of the nation and specific national features, both items compromised by the Nazi ideology and considered politically tricky even within Marxism-Leninism theses. Nevertheless, interesting attempts to document, analyze and interpret the linguistic and ethnic situation of the Sorbs appeared even at that time; in this respect research conducted by the Institute for Sorbian Ethnography (Institut za serbski ludospyt) in the village of Radibor/Radwor between 1963 and 1964 can be mentioned at least, its theme and methodology being ahead of its time.⁵

2) The onset of the *theory of ethnos* or *the school of ethnic processes* in the 1970s, pioneered and backed by Soviet ethnographer Julian V. Bromley (Bromlej) – whose seminal text *Ethnos and Ethnography* was translated into German –,⁶ facilitated the up to then an ideologically inconceivable increase of ethnic studies even in the satellite states of the USSR. Also in Lusatia it was suddenly possible to carry out research into problems of ethnic identity, assimilation or language situation.⁷ Despite its positive practical impact, Bromley’s theses represented only a slight shift away from the subjectivist heritage of Stalin’s “theory of the nation”, the extension (again without doubt a primordialist one) of which they were.⁸ This approach to the concept of the

⁴ HROCH, Miroslav: *Evropská národní hnutí v 19. století*. Praha 1986: Svoboda.

⁵ NOWOTNY, Pawoł: *Někotre wunoški sociologiskich slědženjow w Radworju*. Nowa doba, 19, Nr. 284 (4.12.1965), special supplement, pp. 6–8; MUSIAT, Zygmunt: *Ludowědnosociologiske slědženja w Radworju*. Nowa doba, 21, Nr. 76 (1.4.1967), Předženak, p. 4. Paradoxically, some findings of the research were assessed only three decades later: KELLER, Ines: *Ethnosozilogisches Material über Radiborer Familien 1964*. Lětopis, 40, 1993, Nr. 1, pp. 133–141.

⁶ BROMLEJ, Julian V.: *Ethnos und Ethnographie*. Berlin 1977: Akademie-Verlag.

⁷ Kupř. KASPER, Měrćin: *Etniska zhromadnosć – rěč – etniske sebjewědomje*. Rozhlad, 31, 1981, Nr. 6, pp. 224–230; NEDO, Pawoł: *Mały lud a jeho kultura*. Rozhlad, 32, 1982, Nr. 3, pp. 86–90; Nr. 4, pp. 141–146.

⁸ HORÁLEK, Adam: *Tři přístupy k pupkům národů. Primordialisticko-modernistický diskurz prizmatem aktivity a objektivity etnicity*. Český lid, 99, 2012, Nr. 1, p. 32.

nation and ethnicity thus persisted to the end of the existence of the GDR and survived even longer.

Changes after 1990

New attitudes and paradigms in the context of the ethnolinguistic situation of Lusatia have come into existence and use only in the past two decades. They embrace several mutually interlinked effects and factors:

- 1) After the fall of the Iron Curtain, opening up to the world and the re-unification of Germany, prisms of constructivist approaches towards ethnicity find their way into Sorbian social science disciplines and humanities. In everyday dealings, however, they are not much promoted and tend to remain confined to a narrow stratum of specialists and professionals.
- 2) With respect to legislation defining the rights of the Sorbs in Saxony (or Brandenburg), the commitment of belonging to the Sorbian nationality is left entirely to the free will of each individual and need not be instantiated or objectively proved. According to Article 1 of the Saxony Sorbian Law of 1999: „Those are part of the Sorbian nation, who declare their identification with it. The acknowledgement is free. It may be neither denied nor verified. No disadvantages may arise from this declaration.“⁹ The above volitional approach thus somewhat indirectly (at least statistically) compensates real impacts of the assimilation process: if one can be Sorbian on the basis of declaring this fact only (i.e. without the objective realities, such as the language competence or the existing family tradition...), it seems still theoretically possible to speak about the frequently quoted total of 40,000 members of this ethnic group.¹⁰ In terms of the language or school: even though the shift from the preceding model of linguistically defined classes (A and B)¹¹ to the concept of full immersion education (2plus) resulted, among other things, mainly in the shortage of pupils from Sorbian mother tongue families, this change can be considered a symbolic loosening of the strict ethnic and linguistic border.
- 3) The general (post)modernist context of minority (i.e. not only ethnic) rights has become another significant factor which incorporates the strivings to maintain minority ethnic groups, their languages and cultures, in a much larger, universal matrix. In the practical ethnolinguistic activities (frequently aimed in the implementation and anti-globalisation directions) this fact showed by, among other things, a considerable shift from the ethnic level to the linguistic one (in the context of Lusatia by the concrete shift from “supporting the Sorbs” to “supporting the Sorbian language”). Even the given tendency is a witness to the retreat of efforts to make a clear-cut delimitation of the Sorbian ethnicity and to the *postmodern* focus on this phenomenon.

⁹ In the German original version: „Zum sorbischen Volk gehört, wer sich zu ihm bekennt. Das Bekenntnis ist frei. Es darf weder bestritten noch nachgeprüft werden. Aus diesem Bekenntnis dürfen keine Nachteile erwachsen.“

¹⁰ Linguistically, we can consider only 10,000 – 15,000 Upper Sorbian speakers and 2,000 – 3,000 Lower Sorbian ones at present.

¹¹ In „A-classes“ Sorbian was a dominant language of instruction, in „B-classes“ it was only a subject.

The current situation

In the theory and practice of the Sorbian ethnic/national strivings thus both the primordialist and the constructivist approaches and elements have been mingling in an intricate pattern over the past three decades. The official position, however, has neither been defined nor analysed; moreover, neither by the Sorbian representatives (the Domowina; the Foundation for the Sorbian Nation) nor by the research and academic institutions (the Sorbian Institute in Bautzen; the Institute for Sorbian Studies in Leipzig).

Ethnicity: In the field of ethnicity, therefore, the above principle of “free identification with the ethnic group” represents the starting point. This (apparently highly liberal and democratic) model offering a choice, or if we wish, individual Renan’s plebiscite has, however, its considerable pitfalls and problems. Ethnic self-identification cannot be changed from day to day, as, for example, the membership in a political party; one cannot be Czech on Monday, English on Tuesday and Chinese on Wednesday. The right “to choose ethnic affiliation freely” makes it apparently possible but the reality is quite different. In this context American sociologists E. and V. Hughes wrote: “*If it is easy to resign from the group, it is not truly an ethnic group.*”¹²

In Lusatia, matters are further complicated by another factor, namely a considerable (situationistic) permeability of the ethno-linguistic border and by the level of dual Sorbian-German identity. For many individuals, the dividing line between the Sorbian and the German may be impossible to define precisely. Yet the dual identity can be either balanced or distinctly inclined towards one of the identities. The degree of ethnicity can also sway with time as well as oscillate between tense nationalism and occasional *Sunday ethnicity*.

With respect to the censuses and other numbers, only a small part of the European countries collect and register data concerning the declared ethnic affiliation. The absence of such official statistics applies even in today’s Germany¹³ and (it is what makes the situation here different from that in the successor states of the former Austria-Hungary and other east European countries). The fact that ethnic affiliation cannot be officially documented in Germany, it is also quoted as one of the barriers to the rise of a hypothetical elected Sorbian minority assembly of representatives (“Sejmik”) in the context of difficulty with registration of persons entitled to having the right to vote. It is certainly true that the process of proving the Sorbian origin would be exceedingly complicated and many (even the “ethnic conscious”) Sorbs might even oppose it. For comparison it should be recalled that, e.g. the Sámi of Norway did not shy away from such a solution and, for the purpose of registering the voters electing the Sámi Parliament, they outlined criteria (however questionable) of the Sámi affiliation...

The language: Unlike some other bilingual/diglossic regions of Europe, such as Wales, Scotland, Finland and others, the number of the minority language users is not even recorded in Lusatia, though it is apparently easier to enumerate than ethnicity. Yet it is just the Sorbian language that is without doubt the main ethno-differentiating sign

¹² HUGHES, Everett C., HUGHES, Helen M.: *Where Peoples Meet. Racial and Ethnic Frontiers*. Glencoe (Ill.) 1952: Free Press, p. 156; quoted according to: MARGER, Martin N.: *Race and Ethnic Relations. American and Global Perspectives*. Belmont (Cal.) 1994: Wadsworth Publishing Company, p. 16.

¹³ ELA, Ludwig: *Kelko je Serbow? Abo – dyrbja so mjeńšiny poprawom ličić?* Rozhlad, 60, 2010, Nr. 5, pp. 17–19; Nr. 6, pp. 16–18.

which distinguishes the Sorbs from the Germans. Despite the academic or voluntaristic claims that a person can be fully-fledged Sorbian even without knowing the language, it is just the ability to speak Sorbian that is perceived and presented as *sine qua non* of Sorbian ethnicity. The fact that next to the language there are virtually only a few other characteristic features defining the Sorbs as a distinctive ethnic group supports those who believe in the role of the language as an ethnic component or an ethno-differentiating characteristics.¹⁴

Conclusion

How are we to view the traditional rivalry between the above two ambivalent theories of ethnicity in the Sorbian context?

The solution of the age-long controversy between the primordial and the constructivist concepts has not been arrived at yet in Lusatia; both approaches link both in theory and practice (most often depending on the immediate conceptual, pragmatic and other contexts and needs). We should also remember that the differences between both these extreme concepts of ethnicity can be smaller than they seem to be as they may be based on different accentuation of the same key points, contexts and relations.¹⁵

Sorbs differ from their Slavic neighbours in a greater degree of ethnic hybridity or dual identity; this fact sometimes (in some situations) shows also in a more considerable willingness to accept the citizen concept of the nation.

Compared to the practice before 1990, the prism viewing the Sorbs and Sorbian as part of the Heritage of Mankind intensified as well (see also the recent vision to have Sorbian specific features inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List). This approach then in extension blends with the current topics of anti-globalization efforts, multiculturalism, biodiversity and ecology. The former approach, focusing strictly on the minority/language rights, has thus gained more ground recently, and today it even reaches new qualitative levels tinged with postmodernity. In this way, attempts to answer the above issue, i.e. the specific, individual-targeted question of “Who is Sorbian?” thus largely fades into the background or even loses its significance; to the contrary, the crucial thing is to accentuate collective Sorbian and minority issues “correctly” within the context of current social issues and to use adequate “newspeak”.

To what extent the above changes are beneficial for the Sorbs and their survival as a distinct entity is not easy to say. Each epoch has its own, though often only formal, social and cultural patterns, preferences and historically contingent thematisations. The social accentuation and positive connotation of the term *minority*, which was hard to imagine only a few decades ago, can prove advantageous to small ethnic groups including the Sorbs.

Even though it is helpful to use providential social contexts, it is necessary not to rely solely on them; next to the “big topics” (in the intentions of Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Gesellschaft*), it is desirable to further develop also the useful community contexts (*Ge-*

¹⁴ ELA, Ludwig: *Sprachenpolitik in der Lausitz. Sprachenpolitik und Sprachenrecht im deutsch-sorbischen Gebiet 1990 bis 2014*. Bautzen 2014: Sorbisches Institut/Serbski institut, pp. 103–104.

¹⁵ HROCH, Miroslav: *Národy nejsou dílem náhody*, Praha 2009: Sociologické nakladatelství, p. 44 nn.

meinschaft).¹⁶ One reason for it is the fact that contemporary postmodern optics forces out the traditional concept of “the nation” and replaces it with sometimes too abstract levels of “minority/human rights”, multiculturalism and diversity, in which the very object of concern gets paradoxically lost or is considered an anachronism. Therefore, the thesis of Claude Levi-Strauss, which is of utmost concern for the Sorbs, says: “*Every culture develops in mutual exchanges with other cultures. But it has to counteract this; otherwise it would soon have nothing specific left to exchange.*”¹⁷ Therefore, the crucial question is whether the Sorbs will be able to find a balanced position between clear self-delimitation and openness to enriching influences. For what is at stake is not only the result of the academic controversy between primordialism and constructivism but, ultimately, the future of the Sorbs and their language.

¹⁶ TÖNNIES, Ferdinand: *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Leipzig 1887: Fues’s Verlag.

¹⁷ Quoted according to: YACOUB, Joseph: *Mezinárodní právo a menšiny*. In: *Menšiny a být menšinou v nejisté Evropě*, Praha 1996: Via Europa, p. 3.