

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFESSIONALISM IN THE LIFE OF SLOVAK ENCLAVES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

JÁN BOTÍK

Abstract: In migration and minority studies from the end of the 19th century to the present, the dominant research discourse is ethnocentrism resp. methodological nationalism. It was therefore natural that in the study of sub-ethnic communities, such as enclaves or minorities, in the social sciences, research concepts are derived from ethnic categories and enclaves or ethnic minorities are analysed primarily in relation to the “parent”, i.e. the core of national community. At present, critical opinions are increasingly being expressed about such approaches. And they point out, among other things, that the research of enclaves or ethnic minorities has long marginalized the equally important principle of identification, which is their practised religiosity and confessional identity. In the case of Slovak enclaves in Central and South-Eastern Europe, the consideration of confessionalism is even more important, as it was one of the two main factors in the migratory movements of Slovak emigrants to these European areas. The economic and religious motives for migration were equal and raised the ethnic and social self-confidence of the population concerned.

Key words: enclave, ethnicity, confessionalism, Lutheranism, group identity

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the Habsburg Monarchy and peace treaties signed in Sremski Karlovci in 1699 and in Požarevac in 1718, Slovaks emigrated to the Pannonian Plain in the southern parts of the Kingdom of Hungary. This opened up the possibility for the settlement of vast areas that had been largely depopulated and devastated as a result of Turkish plundering. Over the 18th and 19th centuries, over 40,000 families and approximately 200,000 Slovaks emigrated to this area and settled there in two dozen ethnic “islands” (Sirácky, 1966, p. 9). The highest density was in the area between the Danube and the Tisza rivers on the borders of present-day Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Croatia. At the end of the 19th century, a small group moved

from that area to the Danube Plain in Bulgaria (Michalko, 1936, p. 27; Kmet', 2012, p. 19).

It was assumed that the emigration of Slovaks to southern Hungary was motivated by economic and religious reasons, which turned out to be two crucial and equally important factors (Kowalská, 2011, p. 46). Surprisingly, however, previous research on the consequences of this emigration and settlement process has focused almost exclusively on ethnic aspects. Research concepts have aimed to explain the development of these enclaves from the point of view of nationalism, especially in relation to the national community which the emigrants separated from. In this situation, people paid little attention to other phenomena that were no less important, such as religiousness and confessional identity. In the case of these Slovak enclaves, it is important to take confessionalism into account because it was one of the main reasons for emigration.

Emigrants from all over Slovakia took part in the emigration to the southern parts of Hungary. They formed two main confessional groups: Roman Catholics and Evangelical Lutherans. It is estimated that more than two-thirds of these emigrants were members of the Evangelical Church who were born in the southern regions of central Slovakia (Štolc, 1971, p. 33; Divičanová, 1996, p. 9; Sklabinská, & Mosnáková, 2013, p. 8). It is reasonable to ask what caused the Evangelicals from central Slovakia in particular to be so highly represented among these emigrants.

During the main flow of Slovak emigrants to the Pannonian region in the 17th century, the number of Roman Catholics in Slovakia sharply decreased as a result of the Protestant Reformation initiated by Martin Luther. The Catholic clergy refused to accept this, and so they embarked on the Counter-Reformation and radical and violent re-Catholicization. The region affected most by Counter-Reformation efforts was central Slovakia, where Protestantism had spread from the Germans living in the mining towns and royal cities. For this reason, the Esztergom Chapter sent a large group of Jesuits to Bzovík Castle in 1618 with the aim to return the “reformed” citizens back to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The following is a testimony about the Jesuits’ re-Catholicization practices:

The Jesuits eagerly worked on eradicating Protestants. They used force, threats, beatings, and all sorts of promises on the masses to drive them away. They accomplished what they intended to do to such a degree that there is now hardly a single Protestant left. An old man named Pavel Sedmák, who was committed to his beloved and pure Gospel of Christ and who refused to renounce it to avoid being converted to the ‘self-redemptive’ Roman Catholic Church, was dragged half-dead out of his own house under an order issued by a local citizen. He was thrown under the gallows, where the greatest criminals were killed by an executioner, and this poor man was killed without his children or friends present. Then he was disgracefully buried. At

that time, under penalty of a fine of forty gold coins, the local Evangelicals were forced to convert to Catholicism. Those who refused to do so were put into the dungeons, beaten with whips and clubs, and forced to attend Mass under the threat of violence. As a result of this cruel treatment, many decided to leave in order to be able to remain faithful to the Gospel of Christ (Schmidt, 1868, p. 259).

The landowners, who needed to hire settlers to work on their estates, responded favourably to the religious motives for emigration. They included a clause in the settlement agreements expressing their willingness to comply with the settlers' "requests to serve the Lord and be guaranteed freedom of religion according to their convictions" (Žilinský, 1872, p. 21). With this guaranteed, the emigrants' determination to persevere in their religious convictions was not the only thing they carried with them to their new settlements. The modest belongings they carried included religious books that were central to their spiritual life and worship, especially the Bible and the *Cithara Sanctorum* hymn book (also called *Tranoscius*) which contained a collection of religious songs. In addition, larger groups of emigrants were often accompanied by an ordained priest or a teacher who could perform religious services. It was not uncommon for priests to join the settlement process as "impopulators" – people who were authorized to provide landowners with the settlers they needed (Kukučka, 2018, p. 176).

The settlement of the Pannonian Plain was a long process. The settlers first had to establish their villages and prepare the land in order for it to provide for them. As the soil was uncultivated, overgrown with thorns, and prone to flooding, it took them a lot of time and effort until crops could be produced (Mráz, 1948, p. 36). In his monograph on Békéscsaba, L. Haan wrote that even in such a challenging situation, "the first concern of the members of a new settlement was to organize themselves as a church" (Haan, 1866, p. 14).

But what did "organizing oneself as a church" mean under the circumstances? The primary role of the new settlements was to elect some respected and trustworthy leaders as "presbyters". The priest, along with the teacher, the presbyters, and other members of the religious community, formed a self-governing unit or "congregation". The role of congregations was to create an infrastructure that would suit religious and ecclesiastical needs such as the church, parsonage, bell tower, cemetery, and school. Dwellings and religious buildings helped settlers put down roots and settle into their new environment. They constructed these buildings together in order to satisfy their religious and educational needs, unite the churchmen, and strengthen their spiritual and residential sense of belonging. These buildings were the result of their collective efforts, and the memories of their endeavours awakened the newcomers' emotional ties to the settled and sacred territory, legitimizing in turn their claim to this new homeland. This legitimacy was crucial, because without it they would have remained somewhat homeless.

With the arrival of Slovak and German Evangelicals, a religious and cultural phenomenon that had been unknown in that area up to that point became established in the Pannonian region. Lutheranism allowed creative thinking and scientific knowledge to permeate church life. Moreover, it brought the principles of autonomy and democracy into church life and through that into communal life. The innovation of making the language of religious services and religious books understandable to the churchgoers is considered the most significant result of Martin Luther's Reformation, both in terms of the humanities and cultural progressiveness. The Bible translated into different languages became "a mirror in which the nations saw themselves". It was also the most significant means for what is usually referred to as "cultural nationalism" (Collinson, 2004, pp. 37, 49).

The members of the Slovak Protestant enclaves remained strong in their Lutheran faith. Whenever the number of settlers in a place reached at least a hundred families, a separate congregation was formed. In the organizational structure of these congregations, the presbytery constituted the most crucial element of their autonomous and democratizing role. This consisted of elected representatives of the local church community, including several dozen elderly, wealthy, literate, respected, and energetic members. Together with local priests and teachers, the presbyters represented the dominant stratum of the elite in their respective religious community. As a result, they had a decisive influence on the standards of religious and ecclesiastical life as well as on communal and cultural life in their respective communities.

Slovak settlers also brought to their enclaves an ardent Evangelical piety which they relied on during religious activities as well as in times of family suffering or when in various states of contemplation. The following testimony originated in a Slovak enclave in Vojvodina:

Everything the Lord does is good is not only the first verse of a popular religious song. For the descendants of Slovak Evangelical emigrants, it means so much more. It is the life credo their distant ancestors left them with. It has been more than 250 years since the first Slovak settlers consoled each other with this song when the time came for them to leave their land and start building a new home in this region. Their first steps in the new land, the process of bread making in the new home of the breadwinner, and the creation of settlements in a foreign world all brought their fair share of troubles. It was necessary to overcome homesickness and the longing for those left behind. Above all, it was necessary to learn how to cope with the new environment and to accept it as part of God's will. *His will is holy*, as our ancestors sang in a hymn (Myjavcová, 2004, p. 71).

The 1636 *Cithara Sanctorum* hymn book by Jiří Tranovský, also known as *Tranoscius*, was a songbook used in places of worship and a prayer book for everyday life and special occasions. It contained prayers for the morning and

evening; days of the week; protection against storms, plagues and other diseases, rising prices, and warfare; and help in times of trouble and various other occasions. This hymn book was in every family's home and was often owned by every adult. It played an important role in the Evangelical settlers' spiritual life and in the way they saw themselves. Indeed, this hymn book can be described as their cultural code (Tušková, 2011, p. 252).

The researchers of these Protestant enclaves agree that religion played a crucial role in the settlers' lives. It was a factor behind the formation of individual groups and their identities, and it served as an organizational principle that affected the practical sphere of life in various ways (Jakoubek, 2010, p. 74). The Evangelical Church had an impact on settlers' entire lives from their arrival. This was possible due to the fact that it managed the most important aspects of spiritual and communal life as well as the most important milestones and events in the lives of individuals, such as birth, confirmation, marriage, and death. It had a significant impact on marriage and family, moral conduct, education, training, way of thinking, customs and traditions, and commercial and business activities. All this made it clear that the Evangelical Church shaped the mentality, culture, and identity of the people living in the Slovak enclaves in a particular way (Berédi, 1995, p. 8). It is therefore no coincidence that these Slovak settlers answered "I am an Evangelist" instead of "I am Slovak" when asked how they identified themselves by the historian Jozef Maliak, who carried out research in Vojvodina. From these answers, he drew the conclusion that their sense of faith was stronger than their sense of nationality (Maliak, 1923, p. 50).

The many roles played by the Evangelical Church led to confessionalism taking the dominant position in the group identification of these emigrants. Until the beginning of the 20th century, it shaped their collective distinctiveness. However, it was not the only identity-forming factor. The idea about the identity of a certain individual or a broader group was formed by several components of a complex identity which included confessional identity and local, ethnic, cultural, and other identities. The individual components of this complex identity "are bound by mutual relationships of varying intensity and quality. Sometimes they simply co-exist when they do not influence each other in any way. However, there are also cases where such identities are mutually determined, blended, interchanged, and considered identical. Religious and ethnic identities tend to blend in ethnically and religiously homogeneous communities, where all Slovaks are Evangelicals and all Evangelicals are Slovaks, whereas other ethnic groups are of a different religion" (Lenovský, 2017, p. 56). This situation is characteristic of the majority of Slovak enclaves. Since in their complex identity their "Slovak identity" also overlaps with their Evangelical one, Miroslav Kmet' reached the conclusion that these enclaves could be seen as an ethno-confessional phenomenon (Kmet', 2010, p. 204).

Among the ethnic attributes in the ecclesiastical and religious life of the Slovak enclaves, the mother tongue proved to be of crucial importance. As a result, the Evangelical Church played a central role in these enclaves in terms of integration and ethnic awareness and contributed – through priests and teachers from the Slovak homeland – to maintaining contact with the mother nation (Myjavcová, 1996, p. 24).

The circumstances of the historical and cultural development of Slovaks showed that the language of the Bible of Kralice from the end of the 16th century – also known as Biblical Czech – became the language of worship and written correspondence of Slovak Evangelicals. Emigration and the detachment of Slovak enclaves from events happening in the mother nation meant that Biblical Czech continued to prevail in the enclaves for much longer than in Slovakia itself. This is why it is perfectly justified to inquire about the reason as to why Biblical Czech, as well as religious ceremonies and various documents in this language, was one of the most important factors and determining features of confessional and ethnic (i.e., Slovak) identity for the enclave communities up until the beginning of the 20th century. Several facts contributed to this. First of all, until the codification of the Slovak language by Ľudovít Štúr in 1844, biblical language had been used in churches and educational environment for many generations. People used this language to preach, sing, pray, and write various manuscripts and texts. The language used in the Bible and in *Tranoscius*, with its antique and spiritual nature, was extraordinary and uplifting. As such, it was used by common people in speeches and ceremonial acts at weddings and funerals, on tombstones, in family chronicles, and even in economic writing. The poet and publicist Paľo Bohuš noticed that the biblical language used in *Tranoscius* and the Bible of Kralice started to resemble Slovak in the enclaves both in oral and written form. This was the case lexically, grammatically, and in terms of pronunciation. The language became softer and more similar to Slovak dialects (Bohuš, 1995, p. 359). The Evangelical priests Ján Stehlo and Samuel Borovský described the language of the Bible of Kralice and *Tranoscius* as “Biblical Slovak” (Dudok, 1997, p. 45).

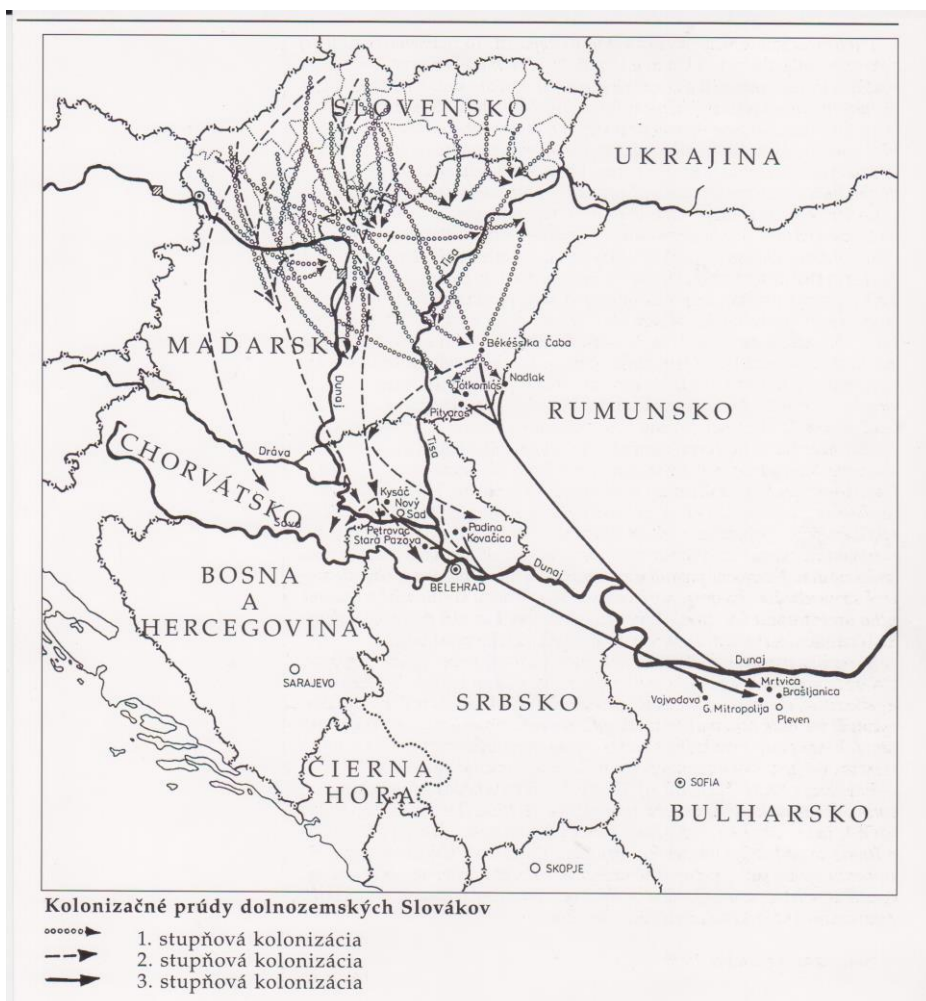
By separating from their original community and integrating themselves into a foreign society that was different from their own in terms of language and religion, Slovak enclaves found themselves in a new and significantly different situation. As a result, they experienced various peculiarities in their development. The degree of these peculiarities varied according to the extent to which continuous and discontinuous trends contributed to their development in terms of how the relationship between persistence and change, tradition and innovation, acceptance and rejection, and resistance and conformity was represented (Lipták, 2000, p. 14).

In the development of Slovak enclaves, where confessionalism held a dominant position for a long time, continuous trends prevailed until the turn of the

19th and 20th centuries. The continuous persistence of the religious, linguistic, and cultural features of these enclaves was a result of conservatism that was typical of the confessional communities. One characteristic trait of these groups was the creation of defence mechanisms against merger with the surrounding society. Perhaps the most common of these mechanisms was the principle of group endogamy (the practice of marrying within a specific religious or ethno-confessional group) (Uherek, & Beranská, 2011, p. 12). Endogamy was used to maintain confessional reproduction as well as the reproduction of linguistic and ethno-cultural practices that the enclave communities had brought with them from their homeland.

Many priests and teachers served in the Evangelical Church in Slovak enclaves. In addition to their pastoral and educational endeavours, they also devoted their time to literary and research activities. These resulted in relatively extensive poetic, prosaic, journalistic, patriotic, historiographical, linguistic, ethnographic, natural scientific, agricultural, and other specialized works (Ormis, 1935; Mráz, 1948; Jančovic, 2009; Kmeť, 2010). This work was a testament to the various activities pursued by these scholars. It also significantly contributed to the preservation of the historical and cultural memory of the respective enclaves. It represents a valuable source of introspection. It was a substantial testimony on the specific features of their collective identity and their persistence as a minority, contributing to enclave self-awareness and the profiling of group identity. This work with thematic content and cognitive benefits went beyond the enclaves themselves and became an organic part of Slovak cultural values.

The dominance of confessional identity in the environment of Slovak enclaves began to decline to a more considerable extent at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This decline happened as a result of the nationalist movements focusing on the epicentre of national life in the spirit of Romanticism and Herder's idea of the "national spirit". It was also due to the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. Even in the enclaves, these events contributed to an emphasis being placed on the principles of national identity and the formation of patriotic feelings towards these settlers' country of origin. With the development of national consciousness, the previous dominance of confessionalism and confessional identity started to wane. From this perspective, it was only a matter of time until the discourse on methodological nationalism would begin to be developed in migration and minority studies.



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