

Exploring Multicultural Dynamics in Slavic Polesia: Ethnology and Dialectology at the Crossroads

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The paper explores the history, current state, and significance of studying the Polesian ethnocultural region, with emphasis on Ukrainian Polesia. It outlines the region's archaic specificity and its diffuse ethnocultural field. The research relies on dialectological and typological methods, with an ethnolinguistic approach to semantic and structural unity in folklore. It has demonstrated the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and other forms of *elusiveness* that complicate the representation of Polesia as a unified entity, thereby framing it instead as a multicultural and heterogeneous region.

▪ Keywords: Polesia, ethnocultural borderland, traditional culture, interdisciplinary study, ethnolinguistics

V prispevku so obravnavani zgodovina, trenutno stanje in znanstveni pomen preučevanja poleškega etnokulturnega območja, s posebnim poudarkom na ukrajinskem Polesju. Predstavljena sta arhaična posebnost območja in njegov razpršen etnokulturni prostor. Raziskava temelji na dialektoloških in tipoloških metodah ter etnolingvističnem pristopu, ki razkriva pomensko in strukturno enotnost v folklori. Prikazane so kulturne, jezikovne, etnične in druge oblike *izmuzljivosti*, ki otežujejo predstavljanje Polesja kot enotne entitete, pač pa ga opredeljujejo kot multikulturno in heterogeno območje.

▪ Ključne besede: Polesje, etnokulturno mejno območje, tradicionalna kultura, interdisciplinarna raziskava, etnolingvistika

Introduction

The issue of ethnocultural borderlands is a relevant problem in contemporary scholarship. A comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to its study as a multifaceted phenomenon and an object of ethnological, folkloristic, linguistic, and cultural research is of particular importance. Such an analysis allows for both synchronic investigation and the tracing of dynamic changes at the present stage. In characterizing the concept of a “cultural borderland”, Roman Kyrchiv defines it as “the formation of structures that emerge in territorial contact zones, at the intersections of different ethnic groups, based on the historical process of connections, interactions, and mutual influences of their cultures, primarily at the traditional level” (2013: 16). In such zones – among which the Polesia¹ is a striking and cohesive cultural and linguistic area of Slavia² –

¹ The name is transliterated from Ukrainian as ‘Polissia’ or ‘Polissya’; for reasons of textual coherence, the spelling has been unified to the more common form ‘Polesia’ (editor’s note).

² ‘Slavija’ (Slavia) is a term used in contemporary Slavic linguistic and cultural studies to denote the totality of Slavic-speaking countries and communities, considered as a single linguistic-cultural area.

complex ethnocultural and ethnosocial processes take place, constituting an important subject of research. An integrated view of Slavia as a single cultural and linguistic continuum has been implemented in international scholarly projects such as the *General Slavic Linguistic Atlas* and the *Linguistic Atlas of Europe*, when the contours of a new direction in ethnology, namely ethnolinguistic geography, began to take shape. Within this framework, the geographical distribution of linguistic phenomena is studied comprehensively in the context of the areal patterns of elements of traditional material and spiritual culture.

The Polesian zone is of particular interest as an area of Ukrainian-Belarusian-Russian borderlands and a distinct case of ethnocultural contacts. Ethnocultural borderlands are clearly defined along the entire perimeter of the Ukrainian ethnic territory, especially in the north, where the Chernihiv–Sumy and Bryansk Polesia stand out as the Ukrainian-Russian borderland. The Ukrainian-Belarusian Polesia includes the eastern, central, and western parts of this natural-geographical and ethnographic region. The Polesian multicultural dialect, possessing a common Slavic character, represents “a unified entity – linguistic, folkloric, and ethnographic” (Tolstoy, 1995: 13), requiring thorough and comprehensive analysis. Our analysis aligns with the contemporary research on the genealogies of scientific approaches to multicultural and multilingual borderlands. Findings show cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and other forms of *elusiveness* that challenge the representation of Polesia as a unified entity, thereby framing it instead as a multicultural and heterogeneous region.

This research is especially relevant in the context of contemporary events, where the fundamental principles of human life have been disrupted, and the relic zones of material and spiritual culture in the Slavic world have suffered destruction, turning into war zones. At a time when the world is increasingly threatened by unforeseen crises, wars, conflicts, and devastation, the significance of Slavic studies as a discipline focused on Slavic heritage – possessing unique autochthonous values required by the modern world – continues to grow (Giurchinov, 2009: 549).

Geographical boundaries and ethnic composition

Researchers from different fields define the historical and ethnographic boundaries of Polesia in various ways, yet they agree that the region encompasses the Prypiat River basin and adjacent forested areas. Polesia is divided into three parts: Western, Central, and Eastern. The tripartite division of Polesia into Western, Central, and Eastern zones is grounded in a combination of geographical (Heremchuk, 1973), dialectological (Dzendzelivskyi, 1960; Arkushyn, 1996), ethnographic (Stelmaschuk, 1981; Kurochkin, 2007), and historical-cultural (Dashkevych, 1998) factors. Administrative delimitation aligns with oblast borders, though it remains secondary to linguistic and cultural patterns.

The “central part” refers to the lower course of the Prypiat River and the area between the Dniro and Prypiat rivers (Tolstoy, 1986: 6). According to 19th-century definitions, the region was often described as “Core Polissia, i.e. the Prypiat River valley”, or “the territory forming the basin of the Prypiat River” (Stryzhak, 2003: 121).

Historical sources from the 14th–16th centuries, including Old Ukrainian and Belarusian-Lithuanian chronicles, indicate that Polesia was situated between Volhynia, Mazovia, Prussia, Lithuania, and Rus (Moiseyenko, 2006: 13–14). Chroniclers often broadly defined thus the territory inhabited by the Lithuanians and Ruthenians, extending from the Podlasie Voivodeship to the Dniro River. After the Union of Lublin in 1569, the territories of Volhynia and Western Polesia became part of Poland. Following the partitions of Poland, Western Polesia came under the control of the Russian Empire. After the proclamation of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, this territory was part of the Ukrainian State, but from 1921, Western Polesia was again under Polish rule. In 1939, Berestia and Pinsk were incorporated into Belarus, while Volhynian Polesia became part of Ukraine (Arkushyn, 2004: 13–14). Polesia has therefore been a zone of interaction between different peoples, primarily Slavic and Baltic. The region is sometimes classified along ethnic lines, including Ukrainian, Belarusian, Russian, Lithuanian, and Polish segments. Today, Polesia spans the territories of four countries: Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, and Russia (Moiseyenko, 2006: 9). The Polesian section of Ukraine’s ethnocultural borderland comprises “the entire length of the modern state border between Ukraine and Belarus, extending into the Podlasie borderland with Poland in the northwest and the border with Russia in the northeast” (Kyrchiv, 2013: 23).

In Ukraine, Polesia occupies the left bank of the Prypiat River (northern), the right bank of the Prypiat and Dniro rivers (southern), and the left bank of the Dniro River (eastern). The northern and partly the southern sub-province of Polesia within the territory of Ukraine is formed by Belarusian Polesia, while most of the southern and eastern subregions belong to Ukraine. Based on physical and geographical conditions, Ukrainian Polesia is further divided into six areas: Volhynian, Male (between the Volhynian and Podolian Uplands), Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Novhorod-Siversky (Marynych, 1962: 113).

For regions characterized by close ethnocultural contacts, the opposition of “one’s own” and “the other” proves to be particularly relevant. This opposition, in particular, actualizes notions of “one’s own” and “the other” space, and, when applied to society, is interpreted through multi-level human connections – familial, ethnic, linguistic, confessional, and social – ultimately tracing back to archaic beliefs (Belova, 2009: 581). The way representatives of various ethnic groups are perceived is determined by the general cultural opposition of “one’s own” and “the other”. Stereotypes of nationalities, as well as of inhabitants of certain regions and localities, bear a strong emotional imprint, often emphasizing negative attitudes toward immediate neighbours (Bartminski, 2005: 178–180). At the same time, the bipolar organization of such stereotypes may

range from negative to positive collective representations, depending on historical circumstances and the sociopolitical situation. In borderland areas, ethnic self-expression tends to weaken, while the opposition between “us” and “them” intensifies. This phenomenon can be explained by the centre–periphery dynamic, which in turn leads to processes of “national dualism and ethnic self-identification, intensified assimilation, and a heightened sense of preserving and protecting ethnic identity” (Kyrchiv, 2013: 35). Ethnic processes in the Polesia region exhibit their own specificity, they evolved at a slower pace and with lower intensity than in other areas of interethnic contact. The distinctive nature of Polesia (dense forest wilderness and impassable swamps) was for a long time the reason for the region’s isolation. Difficult access to these areas and poor transportation routes contributed to the fact that there were relatively few migratory movements; differential and integrative processes took place slowly and in a distinctive manner, and the local population lived here virtually without significant migration up to the present day (Moiseyenko, 2006: 8). Historically living at the crossroads of ancient cultures and later becoming part of distinct nations, the population often lacks a unified self-awareness, and their ethnic affiliation is not always clearly defined.

The inhabitants of Polesia have been referred to by various names: Polishchuks, Litvins, and Tuteishi (‘locals’). The most widely accepted term, documented in maps and records from the early 17th century, is Polishchuks, whose language was identified as a dialect of a larger territorial-linguistic (ethnic) entity – either as a northern Ukrainian or southwestern Belarusian dialect. The ethnonym ‘Litvins’ applied to the population that belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th–18th centuries. Residing in the region where the East Slavic nations – Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians – were forming, yet preserving their distinctiveness, the Litvins did not identify with any of these groups even in the 19th century. Scholars of the past emphasized the lack of a “national consciousness” among both the Belarusian and Ukrainian populations of Polesia, attributing this to their distance from the “centres of national life”. They noted that “the Polesian inhabitant felt – and still feels – distinct from the neighbouring peoples or those living among them, such as Poles, Russians, and Jews, though they usually refer to themselves as ‘locals’ (*tuteishyi*), ‘Rusyns’, ‘simple people’, or ‘Orthodox’” (Polesie, 1996: 2173–2174). Contemporary research confirms that Polishchuks do not identify themselves as either Ukrainians or Belarusians, while the term ‘Litvin’ is now considered offensive (Moiseyenko, 2006: 17–18). Modern sociolinguists discuss the presence of derogatory nicknames for Polishchuks as an expression of “regional and ethnic hostility” where “the other” is equated with something “not mine”, “frightening”, “bad”, or “hostile”. Hate speech, according to a contemporary Ukrainian linguist, includes offensive nicknames since “it is human nature to insult those whom one considers outsiders. This can be as simple as referring offensively to the Polissians, the Volhynians, the Poltava *varenyky*, or the Obolon *rahuls*” (Dubchak, 2023: 28).

The term *Polishchuk* in the sense of ‘inhabitant of Polesia’ (1861) is cited in *The Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language* by Borys Hrynchenko (1909: 285). In a separate entry of the eleven-volume *Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language*, the ethnonym (Polishchuk, Polishchucka, Polishchuks) is explained as “inhabitants or natives of Polesia”. The adjective ‘Polishchutskyi’ is also provided. Various literary excerpts included in the dictionary illustrate the distinctiveness of this ethnographic group and the stereotypes associated with Polishchuks, for example:

The unfortunate Polishchuks, or, as they are called in Ukraine, Litvins, appeared at Ukrainian factories; the Polishchuks engaged in hunting, beekeeping, and fishing, and faithfully preserved ancient Slavic traditions; Mykola, the driver – a small, thin, sharp-eyed man from Chernihiv, a typical Polishchuk – couldn’t stop laughing; For Polishchucka Hanna, childhood memories of gathering mushrooms in Polesia came alive; The Hutsul woman wears vibrant, multicoloured fabrics. The Polishchucka has a more restrained palette, dominated by red and cherry tones, evoking the traditional aesthetic of the region. Someone began singing an old Polishchuk song. (SUM, 1976: 86)

The inhabitants of Polesia were also studied as a special anthropological type with the methods of physical anthropology. In the northern “anthropological zone” of Ukraine, which includes several morphological variants, the Polesian type was clearly identified (Diachenko, 1965). The Polesian variant of the northern “anthropological zone” covers northern Zhytomyr and Rivne regions and extends into Volyn and Right-Bank Polesia, where the population exhibits close anthropological similarities. From an anthropological perspective, the Polishchuks, as one of the variants of the northern anthropological zone in Ukraine, stand in clear contrast to representatives of other ethnographic groups (Seheda, 2001: 105), while in most characteristics the right-bank Polishchuks are close to the bearers of the Volyn anthropological type. Anthropological studies confirm the “absence of Mongoloid admixture” and indicate the preservation of archaic Proto-European features among the local population (Konduktorova, 1973; Seheda, 2001: 105;). One of the first to draw attention to the “archaic traits” of the local population was Fedir Vovk, who noted that in the northern belt of Ukraine, “the ancient population of the country has been preserved” (Vovk, 1995: 16).

A widely used self-designation of the local population was *Tuteishi* (‘locals’), a term that distinguished their ethnic boundaries without associating them with either Ukrainians or Belarusians, particularly during Polish censuses in the 20th century. The region’s inhabitants were often referred to as Tuteishi due to the absence of a clearly defined ethnic self-consciousness. The renowned linguist Yurii Shevelov explained the emergence of this term by noting that, in the north, Polesia bordered the (proto-)

Belarusian language, while in the south, it bordered the (proto-)Ukrainian language. Consequently, “within the core area of the Polesian dialects, the self-designation *Tuteishi* (*Tuteishyia*) emerged – meaning those who have ‘always been here’ and who resist both the northern and southern expansions” (cited in Moiseyenko, 2006: 18). Scholarly research confirms that the Polesian population stands apart from neighbouring ethnic groups in terms of language, material culture, and spiritual traditions.

Polesia as an object of ethnological and dialectological research

The name ‘Polesia’, etymologically meaning any ‘forested area’, was first mentioned in the Galician-Volhynian Chronicle in 1275. In 1560, the first map highlighting Polesia was published in Gdańsk. By the 15th and 16th centuries, the term ‘Polesia’ became common in the works of Polish historians such as Jan Długosz, Marcin Kromer, and Maciej Strykowski. Information about Polesia gradually accumulated in various historical sources, including chronicles, travellers’ notes, inventories, and inspections. The first researchers of Polesia were Polish historians, archaeologists, geographers, and ethnographers (Bandarchyk, 1988: 4–8).

The study of the region’s traditional material and spiritual culture has consistently led to conclusions about its archaic nature, originality, and uniqueness. Linguistic works dedicated to Polesia began to appear at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, although they did not cover the entire region and were focused on specific areas. Up until the 1960s and 1970s, “Polesia remained insufficiently studied in terms of ethnography, although in the past it had attracted the close attention of ethnographers, including the famous Kazimierz Moszyński” (Tolstoy, 1997: 239).

The ethnologist and linguist Kazimierz Moszyński (1887-1959) entered the history of Polish ethnography as an amateur through his publications, which were classified as regional studies. In 1912, while working as a teacher in Vasylykiv County in the Kyiv region, he collected ethnographic material in Ukrainian Polesia, explaining his interest by stating that he had long been drawn to the “Ruthenian” lands. With the support of the Polish Regional Studies Society, he conducted a folklore and ethnographic fieldwork to Polesia in June 1914, and the collected materials were later published in the *Polesie Wschodnie* (1928). During subsequent expeditions to Polesia, Moszyński gathered materials for his later works. Notably, during a joint Ukrainian-Polish fieldwork in September 1932, in which the Ukrainian musicologist Filaret Kolessa participated, 220 Polesian songs with melodies and 24 instrumental tunes were recorded on phonograph cylinders. These materials, lost on the eve of the Second World War, were later recovered and prepared for publication by Sofia Hrytsia, who facilitated the release of *Musical Folklore from Polesia in the Records of Filaret Kolessa and Kazimierz Moszyński* (1995). This publication presents two versions of the transcriptions of the

song lyrics, one in Latin script and the other in Cyrillic, preserving the Polesian dialect. In studying the material and spiritual culture of the Polishchuks, Moszyński emphasized the regional specificity and archaic nature of the area's folk culture. The significance of his works on spiritual culture, known collectively as *Kultura Ludowa Słowian* (1934, 1939), extends far beyond ethnography and folklore studies, encompassing linguistics, musicology, and archaeology (Holovatiuk, 2017: 149).

A new phase in the study of Polesia began with linguistic research, particularly the systematic study of Polesian dialects. The First All-Union Coordination Meeting on pressing issues in Slavic studies supported the initiative of the Institute of Slavic Studies and Balkan Studies to publish a dialect dictionary of Polesia. Soon after, a group of scientists from this institute, led by Russian Academy of Sciences academician Nikita I. Tolstoy, developed a project to study the traditional spiritual culture of Polesia called the Polesian Ethnolinguistic Atlas (Tolstoy, 1995: 5). This project covered 148 settlements, including Podlasie and practically the entire Polesian territorial-linguistic continuum (Brest, Gomel, Bryansk, Kursk, Sumy, Chernihiv, Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Rivne, and Volyn regions). The research was based on the experience of compiling the linguistic atlas of western Polesia by Józef Tarnawski, which was published in 1939 and clearly reflected the methods of Moszyński's school, particularly his ethnographic questionnaire on spiritual culture. Starting in the 1960s, systematic surveys of the Polesian region began, resulting in numerous works that comprehensively characterized the entire Polesian area. By the end of the twentieth century, the main research directions in Ukrainian dialectology, including the study of Polesia, remained descriptive, lexicographical, and linguistic-geographical.

Studies on the dialectology of Polesia, in particular the published volumes of the *Ukrainian Dialectological Atlas* (1984, 1988), clearly demonstrate the connection between the Polesia linguistic area and Ukrainian dialects, as noted in the review of research on the ethnocultural and linguistic study of Polesia (Tolstoy, 1995). In dialectological studies, it is a widely accepted assertion, as was stressed by Tolstoy, that "the geography of a phenomenon is its history in spatial terms", or that "linguistic geography is the paleontology of language", a notion that finds confirmation in the study of Polesia.

Later on, several projects focusing on Polesian dialects, particularly in areas affected by the Chernobyl disaster, were carried out by staff from the Institute of the Ukrainian Language of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (departments of dialectology and the history of the Ukrainian language). Ukrainian scholars have noted that the rapid destruction of part of the Central Polesian area as a cohesive autochthonous micro-continuum after 1986 – particularly the disappearance of many dialects due to the scattered resettlement of villagers into multiple new, distant settlements because of the Chernobyl disaster – made it impossible to replenish information. The value of many dialects spoken by autochthonous Polishchuks became linked solely to the past, as the future appeared uncertain and elusive (Hrytsenko, 2015: 101). In 2011, by a

resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, it was decided to establish the State Museum-Archive of Folk Culture of Ukrainian Polesia (*Holos Ukrainy* 30.4.2011, no. 79, Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy), based on the cultural assets collected from the territory affected by radioactive contamination as a result of the ecological and humanitarian disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

The “ancestral homeland” of the Ukrainians and “archaic zone” of Slavia

The “ancestral homeland” of the Ukrainians geographically coincides with the north-western cultural-historical province of Ukraine, which, in addition to Volyn and Upper Dniester regions, also includes Ukrainian Polesia. Polesia played a key role in the ethnogenesis of the Ukrainians and in preserving their ethnocultural heritage (Zaliznyak, 1996: 188). At the same time, the regions of Central Dnipro Ukraine and the Right-Bank Kyiv area, including Pereiaslav and Chernihiv-Sivershchyna, are identified in scholarly discourse as the primary territorial centre of the formation of the Ukrainian people (Naulko, 2013: 95), a view that reflects and reinforces the construction of the Ukrainian national narrative. Many linguists, historians, and ethnographers recognize Polesia, specifically the area between the Middle Dnieper, the Prypiat River, the Dniester, and the Vistula, as the territory of the early Slavic settlement. Polesia, as an archaic zone of Eastern Slavia during the period of Kyivan Rus (9th–12th centuries) became the periphery of newly formed ethno-linguistic entities (Klymchuk, 1997: 241). Consequently, it stood in clear linguistic contrast to the proto-Belarusian and proto-Russian dialects and, though less distinctly, also differed from the proto-Ukrainian ones (Moiseyenko, 2006: 387).

Polesia is referred to in Slavistic research as one of the Slavic “archaic zones”. Kazimierz Moszyński even described Polesia as “archi-archaic”. At the same time, the scholar was right in emphasizing that this region is not a self-contained, isolated world but, on the contrary, its folk culture exhibits multifaceted connections. His words are confirmed by the observations of the Moscow ethnolinguistic school, according to which certain “elements of Polesia’s traditional culture have counterparts in other areas of the Slavic world or even beyond it” (Tolstoy, 1986: 7). Nikita Tolstoy defined Polesia as an “archaic zone”, which is “not just an area of well-preserved traditions” but also one that has “a specific stable system of traditional spiritual culture” (1989: 14). Other Slavic “archaic zones” include the Russian North, western Bulgaria, central and northeastern Serbia, Kashubia, and the Carpathians (Tolstoy, 1989: 15). In his works, the scholar consistently emphasized the common Slavic nature of Polesian themes (Tolstoy, 1995: 5).

Within the context of the Polesian ethnocultural region, the West Polesian dialect remains insufficiently studied. It is part of the Ukrainian linguistic continuum and has a long ethnocultural history, preserving not only the consequences of intensive changes (both immanent and interferential) but also evidence of linguistic archaism.

Ethnological surveys have clearly demonstrated the division of Polesia into two major zones, western and central-eastern, with the boundary line fluctuating within the northern and central parts of the Zhytomyr region, at times reaching the borders of the Rivne and Kyiv regions (Havryliuk, 1994: 337). In the study of Polesian folklore, the variability of mythological beliefs has been repeatedly noted, particularly concerning the image of the *domovoy*, the ‘household guardian spirit’. Polesia represents the western periphery of the distribution of beliefs about this mythological figure, with a noticeable transformation of its image observed from east to west. The most consistent beliefs regarding its obligatory presence in the home, its leadership role in the family, and its function as the “master” were recorded in the Chernihiv region (Vinogradova, 1994: 298–309). The personal dialectal discourse reflected in contemporary linguistic and ethnological studies of the region demonstrates the mythological principle of perceiving reality, inherent in archaic thinking, which is based on an emotional experience of the unity between the world and the individual (Gyngazova, 2014: 157).

The Polesia region represents a specific cultural dialect within the Slavic dialectal landscape, which has made it particularly effective for integrating folkloric and ethnographic research into the broader field of Slavic ethnogenetic studies. A synchronic analysis of traditions was seen as “diachrony unfolded in space” (Tolstoy, 1997: 15) and served as “a source for internal (semantic) reconstruction” (Tolstoy, 1989: 12). The ultimate goal of this reconstruction was to address “broader ethnogenetic issues” (Tolstoy, 1997: 230). Observations in the field of Slavic traditional rituals, folk demonology, incantations, beliefs, and other aspects have shown that Polesia’s spiritual culture retains a number of archaic features. They also serve as evidence of the thesis that dialectal variation applies not only to language but also to the spiritual culture of the Slavs. As a linguo-ethnographic concept, the dialect existed both in folk practice and in the scholarly views of such prominent researchers of the past as Aleksandr Shakhmatov, Dmitry Zelenin, Kazimierz Moszyński, and Hristo Vakarelski. According to Nikita Tolstoy, the features that distinguish a dialect – linguistic, ethnographic, and folkloric – often go hand in hand, creating a multifaceted dialectal profile (Tolstoy, 1989: 13).

Polesian fieldwork: Creation of the Polesian Archive

For many of Nikita I. Tolstoy’s students and followers, as well as for Tolstoy himself, the beginning of their “deep and long immersion” into the “rich world of ancient Slavic spiritual culture” started with their acquaintance with the “villages and hamlets of the remote Polesian wilderness” (Tolstoy, 1997: 9). On the scholar’s initiative, a program of systematic and consistent expeditions to Polesia was launched to collect materials – initially for the *Polesian Dialect Dictionary* and later for the *Ethnolinguistic Atlas*. By the 1970s, the expeditions had taken on a distinctly ethnolinguistic character, supported by detailed programs for studying various aspects of folk culture (Mykytenko, 2024). “The boundaries of modern Slavic languages, dialects, peoples, and ethnic groups”,

noted Tolstoy, “are of relatively late origin. Attention to local phenomena will allow us to see earlier ethnolinguistic and cultural layers on the map of modern Slavia” (Tolstoy, 1989: 15). In his work *Some Considerations and Reconstructions of Slavic Spiritual Culture* (1989), Nikita Tolstoy emphasizes the need to delineate zones that are generally smaller than the boundaries of present-day languages and ethnic groups. In the case of Polesia, such zones encompass contemporary multiethnic and multilingual territories. The application of reconstruction methods developed in comparative-historical linguistics makes it possible to carry out internal reconstruction (within a single macrosystem or “cultural family”, in this case Slavic), and subsequently to move toward external reconstruction and the resolution of the problems of ethnogenesis. Emphasizing the indisputable value of dialectal material for the reconstruction of the Proto-Slavic state, Tolstoy noted that, when moving from synchronic-contemporary typological studies to comparative-historical research, the current Slavic dialectal landscape represents, in relation to many phenomena, “something unfolded in the space of diachrony” (Tolstoy, 1997: 15).

The mapping of linguistic materials confirmed the archaic nature of Polesian dialects, especially the central Polesian dialect. Research in Polesia continued for almost a quarter of a century, becoming for many – including for the Ukrainians – a “centre of scientific attraction” and an “experimental area” for dialectological and later ethnolinguistic fieldwork, which developed into an “independent field of Slavic humanities” (Tolstaya, 2013: 16–19). The expeditions revealed the “latency of the Polesian dialect continuum until recent times”, which “contributed to its preservation in a more archaic, minimally transformed state” (Hrytsenko, 1993: 290). The language of the Pinchuks, the population of the Western Polesian area of Berestia, was already identified in the 19th century as having a Ukrainian foundation, historically labelled ‘Little Russian’ (*Malorossy*) in the terminology of the Russian Empire. Mitrofan Dovnar-Zapolsky, when examining the Polesian language of the Pinchuks, identified its ‘Little Russian foundation’: “The Little Russian foundation is beyond doubt, but it also has its own features and contains, to a greater or lesser extent, Belarusian elements” (Dovnar-Zapolsky, 1895: 27). Ahatanhel Krymsky described the folklore materials presented in Dovnar-Zapolsky’s collection as ‘Ukrainian’, emphasizing that the distinctly marked Ukrainian ethnic character of the collection’s materials provides stronger grounds for the title *Malorussian Polissia* (Krymsky, 1896). Volodymyr Hnatiuk stated that “with the appearance of Dovnar-Zapolsky’s substantial book, any further debate over whether the Pinchuky should be classified as Ruthenians-Ukrainians or as Belarusians would be unnecessary” (Hnatiuk, 1896: 42). The folklore materials included in Dmytro Bulhakovsky’s collection *Pinchuky: An Ethnographic Collection: Songs, Riddles, Proverbs, Rituals, Omens, Prejudices, Beliefs, Superstitions, and a Local Glossary* (St. Petersburg, 1890) led the author to conclude that the language of the Pinchuky “bears the greatest resemblance to the Little Russian dialect” (Bulhakovsky, 1890: 159).

Historians of language have repeatedly attempted to “divide” Polesian cultural monuments, which often exhibited unique features, between Ukrainian and Belarusian traditions, referring to the language as either “West Russian” or “Ukrainian-Belarusian” as a transitional form (Moiseyenko, 2006: 11). Even today, there are publications of folklore texts recorded in the Ukrainian-Belarusian ethnolinguistic border zone that are edited according to the norms of the Belarusian dialect or the modern literary Belarusian language. Such cases are regarded as unscientific and biased. In particular, the editorial principles whereby texts recorded as early as the nineteenth century are presented in accordance with the modern rules of Belarusian orthography have been recognized as an “unscientific practice” and as “inadmissible in the scholarly editorial theory and practice of folklore”. As Roman Kyrchiv emphasizes, this involves not only the erasure of the dialectal features of the folklore language, but also the transfer of an entire body of alien-ethnic (or, in some cases, mixed and transitional interethnic) folklore tradition into another ethnolinguistic system (Kyrchiv, 2013: 29).

A systematic ethnolinguistic survey of Polesia was conducted according to a unified comprehensive Program for the Polesian Ethnolinguistic Atlas (PELA). The collection and research of traditional culture were carried out using specially developed questionnaires, ensuring a certain level of completeness and organization of the material, which was reflected in the extensive and detailed Polesian card index. In addition to the scholars from the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies (ISBS), the Polesian expeditions involved active participation from professors and students of the Moscow (Russia), Gomel (Byelorussia), Lviv (Ukraine), Tartu (Estonia) universities, as well as Zhytomyr and Sumy (Ukraine), and Kursk (Russia) Pedagogical Institutes, among others (Antropov, Plotnikova, 1995: 383).

As a result of the work of the Polesian expedition, a unique collection of incantations was created and systematically expanded. The task of collecting, classifying, and publishing incantations was identified by Tolstoy as one of the top priorities for both East Slavic and Slavic folklore studies in general: “One cannot calmly wait for the time when the tradition of incantations disappears, just as the tradition of the *byliny* has vanished” (Tolstoy, 1986: 137).

At all stages of research, which continued until the early 1990s, the large-scale work – both expeditionary and scientific-analytical – was supported and extended through national academic programs in Ukraine. This work continued to evolve owing to the coordination of institutes and the significance of the research objectives. The materials collected during the expeditions formed the basis of the Polesian Archive created at the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies (ISBS) of Russian Academy of Sciences. In addition to materials gathered in Polesia, the Archive also holds materials collected within the PELA program in other Slavic regions, including a large collection of records from the Carpathian region, materials from expeditions to the Russian North (conducted after 1986 by ISBS staff, professors, and students from the Moscow State University,

among others), as well as responses to questionnaires from several villages in Eastern Poland, Macedonia, and some other regions (Antropov, Plotnikova, 1995: 391).

In the “post-Chernobyl” phase, dedicated work in Polesia was also carried out for many years by members of the Historical and Cultural Expedition of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Ukraine – ethnographers, historians, museum workers, and true enthusiasts of their field. Scholars from Lviv, Kyiv, and Rivne, half of whom were women, worked to restore what is now a “virtual Ukraine” (Kostenko, 2004: 479), meaning Ukraine that does not exist anymore. Research aimed at identifying, preserving, and protecting the historical and cultural heritage of the region was conducted, particularly within the framework of creating the Chernobyl Scientific and Information Fund, which aimed to reflect both the current state of the dialectal cultural-linguistic system and its dynamics (Hrytsenko, 1999: 13).

An important milestone in the study of Ukrainian Polissia was the publication of the collective monograph *Kyiv Polissia: An Ethnolinguistic Study* (1989), devoted to a comprehensive and interdisciplinary description of Kyiv Polissia. It addressed issues related to the settlement of the region, its earliest and later ethnic composition, the anthropological types represented there, and so forth. Linguists proposed, on the basis of new materials, a classification of the Kyiv Polissia dialects, as well as an analysis of hydronyms, toponyms, and anthroponyms. Articles on the dialectology of Kyiv Polissia were accompanied by maps covering the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Cherkasy regions. The historical traditions and contemporary ethnographic features of Kyiv and the Kyiv region were the subject of a monograph by Kyiv ethnographers and historians, the *Ethnography of Kyiv and the Kyiv Region: Traditions and Modernity* (1986). The joint project General Slavic Linguistic Atlas is being conducted through the cooperation of all Slavic academies, together with the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

The significance of the collected expedition materials increased manifold following the technological disaster of the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986, which radically altered the demographic situation in the region and led to the cessation of the existence of the Middle Polesian linguistic area as a dialectal integrity. The very notion of the “Middle Polesian dialect” within the area structure of the Ukrainian language now belongs to the past (Hrytsenko, 1999: 5). The fundamental work of the ethnolinguistic school – a five-volume dictionary titled *Slavic Antiquities* totalling 3,356 pages – was intended to preserve the Polesian dialect within the context of the history of archaic cultural areas. The materials from the Polesian Archive served as the foundation for this fundamental publication, defining its direction and structure. Today, the electronic version of the Polesian Archive allows for keyword and dialectal terminology searches within the database, making it possible not only to preserve the archive in a reliable format but also to optimize work with it.

Ethnolinguistic dictionary Slavic Antiquities in 5 volumes
(Moscow, 1995–2012): Research problematics

The *Ethnolinguistic Dictionary of Slavic Antiquities* (*Slavjanskije Drevnosti*) is the first pan-Slavic attempt to systematically compile lexical and conceptual material reflecting the traditional spiritual culture of the Slavs. The idea of such a dictionary was first voiced at the First International Congress of Slavists in Prague (1929), with subsequent support at later Slavic congresses in Warsaw, Kraków, and Sofia (Vakarelski, 1938). Among precursors of this approach were the early lexicographic efforts of Vuk Karadžić, Vladimir Dal, and Serafim Yereimin, who emphasized the ethnographic and everyday context of lexical items. Similar encyclopaedic works exist in other European traditions – notably, the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Bächtold-Stäubli, Hofman-Krayer, 1927–1942) in German scholarship. In Polish Slavic studies, related efforts include the *Dictionary of Polish Folklore* (Krzyżanowski, 1965) and the ongoing *Dictionary of Folk Language Stereotypes* (edited by Bartmiński), focused on reconstructing the “linguistic worldview” through folklore texts (*Słownik starożytności słowiańskich*; *Słownik ludowych stereotypów językowych*; *Słownik stereotypów i symboli ludowych*). Today, *Slavic Antiquities* occupies a central place in Slavic ethnolinguistics, with electronic access enabling its broad use in international research.

The *Ethnolinguistic Dictionary of Slavic Antiquities* (*Slavjanskije Drevnosti*) is based on the ideas of ethnolinguistic research that studies language through the lens of human consciousness, mentality, ritual and everyday behaviour, mythological representations, and mythopoetic creativity. These were also closely linked to the concept and design of the *Polesian Ethnolinguistic Atlas*, whose creation was primarily motivated by the development of the areal linguistic approach and its application to ethnography, archaeology, ethnology, mythology, and related fields (Tolstoy, 1986: 4). The realization of the ethnolinguistic dictionary became possible due to research in the field of the mythology of Slavic, Indo-European, and other peoples at various stages of typological analysis aimed at diachronic examination, as well as the development of semiotics, which studies the structure and functioning of secondary sign systems and cultural texts.

The dictionary embodies the notion of the integrality of culture by representing language, verbal art, and traditional practices as interconnected manifestations of a unified spiritual whole on the notion of the *integrality* of culture, which constitutes the fundamental and principal position of ethnolinguistics as a field, where the “explanatory power” lies in “the entire complex of spiritual culture”. The theoretical quadrilateral “language – verbal art – culture – self-awareness” (Zapolskaya, 2023: 136) used in the dictionary has become a summarizing theoretical formula for comprehensive studies of various manifestations of traditional spiritual culture. Understanding the isomorphism of language and culture has allowed for discussions on the semantic unity of all forms of cultural text.

Objectives and principles of compiling the dictionary: Significance

The principles of compiling and the objectives of the ethnolinguistic dictionary were outlined in a report by Nikita I. Tolstoy and Svetlana M. Tolstaya at the IX International Congress of Slavists in Kyiv (1983). This presentation resonated significantly within the academic community and continued the issue raised at the previous congress in Zagreb (1978) concerning the reconstruction of ancient Slavic spiritual culture and its territorial cultural-dialectal divisions. The “first practical task” proposed was the principle of compiling an inventory of the main significant elements, considering the description of the paradigmatics of culture, which would provide “a complete understanding of the structure of rituals in each local tradition”. Emphasizing that “a reliable reconstruction” must take into account “all territorial varieties of each element or fragment of culture within the Slavic world and their non-Slavic connections” (Tolstoy, Tolstaya, 1983: 220), the authors articulated a tested methodological approach to scientific analysis based primarily on the area-based characterization of the factual material. By defining as their object of description all forms, varieties, and genres of traditional culture, Nikita and Svetlana Tolstye established clear structural categories for their systematization, each corresponding to a specific fragment of the folk model of the world.

Regarding folklore, they underscored the necessity of “using folklore sources [...] to characterize the ritual and mythological facts”. Such sources included ritual folklore, anecdotes, legends, spells, and minor genres of folklore (riddles, proverbs, sayings, incantations, verbal formulas, and clichés), as well as other genres that directly reflect the folk worldview (ibid.: 229).

The internal connection between lexical (semantic) typology and ethnolinguistics as a culturally oriented discipline has been emphasized in a number of works that have gained widespread recognition, particularly in the *Polesian Ethnolinguistic Collection* (1983), published shortly before the congress in Kyiv.

The focus on studying the content plan of ethno-culture, the understanding of folklore discourse as collectively created and characterized by dynamism, as well as the resulting irradiation of ethnolinguistic and cognitive methods, represents perhaps one of the key directions in the development of contemporary comprehensive interdisciplinary research in Ukrainian ethnology, where the value of the Dictionary lies in embodying these very features – systematicity, explanatory power, and the reflection of the collective and dynamic nature of folklore discourse. Based on the aforementioned postulate of the isomorphism of language and culture, a Dictionary that explores the issues of such interaction and is grounded in the analysis of folklore texts in their broadest sense holds particular significance.

Conclusion

The Polesia region is of particular scholarly interest as a Ukrainian-Belarusian-Russian borderland, the study of which constitutes a pressing task in contemporary Slavic studies. Interdisciplinary research on this region – marked by historically active ethnic and ethnocultural contacts – demonstrates that the population of Polesia stands apart from other ethnic groups in terms of language, as well as material and spiritual culture.

In his study of the material and spiritual culture of the Polesians, Kazimierz Moshyński emphasized the regional specificity and archaic character of the folk culture of this territory. As a result of subsequent ethnolinguistic research, Polesia has been identified as one of the archaic zones of Slavia and the ancestral homeland of the Ukrainians. Ukrainian Polesia is of scholarly interest as a “distinct ethos” (according to Roman Kyrchiv), embodied in the traditional worldview, with a characteristic way of life and a system of customary and moral stereotypes inherent to its population. At the same time, research has demonstrated the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and other forms of *elusiveness* that complicate the representation of Polesia as a unified entity, thereby framing it instead as a multicultural and heterogeneous region. This tension between perceptions of distinctiveness and the realities of diversity has inspired different scholarly approaches. On the one hand, some studies have emphasized classification, seeking to organize materials from the area, to relate them to historical processes and particularly to the ethnogenesis of nations. On the other hand, these classificatory efforts, while constructing analytical categories, have also influenced identity formation: many contemporary inhabitants of Polesia continue to employ or recognize such categories as part of their own self-identification.

The expeditionary work in Polesia, conducted under the leadership of Nikita I. and Svetlana M. Tolstoy, had an international character and continued for more than twenty years. The most significant results were presented in a number of publications, including the *Ethnolinguistic Atlas of Polesia* and the *Ethnolinguistic Dictionary of Slavic Antiquities*, as well as a range of studies on the ethnolinguistics of national scholarly traditions. The analysis of ethnographic and folkloric realities of the Polesian region is therefore of particular importance, not only because ethnolinguistic approaches open onto questions of Slavic ethnogenesis, but also for understanding how successive generations of scholars have approached Polesia, classified its materials, and framed its place within the broader ethnocultural history of the Slavs – an effort in which researchers continue to work toward resolving complex issues of cultural and historical interpretation.

Research data statement

The author states that the article is based on research data that is available in public domain resources and cited in the list of references. No new research data was created in this article.

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Raziskava večkulturne dinamike v slovanskem Polesju na presečišču etnologije in dialektologije

V članku sta obravnavana zgodovina in trenutno stanje znanstvenega raziskovanja poleškega etnokulturnega območja, s posebnim poudarkom na ukrajinskem Polesju. Poudarjen je pomen sistematičnih, dolgoročnih raziskav kompleksnega in heterogenega območja, ki v slovanskem kulturno-zgodovinskem prostoru velja za eno njegovih »arhaičnih con«. Prikazane so zgodovinske in etnografske meje Polesja, notranja diferenciacija območja ter posebnosti njegove tradicionalne kulture.

Polesje je predstavljeno kot stično in prehodno območje jezikovnih, kulturnih in etničnih prepletanj, kjer so procesi medkulturnih in medetničnih interakcij oblikovali razpršeno in spremenljivo etnokulturno polje. Ta fluidnost spodbuja dinamične jezikovne in kulturne izposoje, hkrati pa otežuje odgovore na vprašanja o kulturni in etnični identiteti.

V raziskavi je uporabljena kombinacija dialektoloških, arealnih in strukturno-tipoloških pristopov k analizi folklore in tradicionalne kulture. Etnolingvistika ponuja osrednji metodološki okvir, katerega cilj je rekonstrukcija invariantnih kulturnih oblik s primerjalnim preučevanjem lokalnih različic in interpretacijo semiotičnih kodov, vpetih v tradicionalne prakse. Ideja kulturne celovitosti in iskanje pomenske enotnosti med različnimi oblikami folklore sta temeljna vidika zgodovinsko-genealoškega pristopa, ki usmerja raziskavo.

Z integracijo jezikovnih, etnografskih in folklorističnih podatkov raziskava poudarja analitični potencial poleškega območja za širše razprave o kulturni kontinuiteti, variabilnosti ter prepletanju lokalnih in nadlokalnih tradicij v slovanskem svetu.