

## The German minority in Silesia in light of the National Census 2011

The first, synthetic results of the National Census (NSP) 2011, published in March 2012, confirmed the tendency concerning the decreasing number of Germans and growing number of those who consider themselves to be Silesians (Ślązacy). This makes one think about the functioning of the German minority in Poland, 90% of which lives in the Silesia and Opole Provinces, its future and the direction of ethnic changes in Silesia.

In the census from 2011, 109 thousand people declared their nationality to be German. In the previous census from 2002, there were 153 thousand of such people. In 2011, 809 thousand people identified themselves as Silesians, while in 2002, it was 173 thousand. During the census from 2011 one could for the first time choose a double national-ethnic identity. Only 26 thousand people chose German nationality only, while 52 thousand more joined it with Polish nationality. About 49 thousand chose German nationality as their first. In the case of Silesian identity, the data is the following: 362 thousand chose Silesian identity only, while 415 thousand joined it with Polish identity. As many as 418 thousand people chose Silesian identity as their first.

The main reason for this situation is that a large group of Opole Silesians who declared German nationality in the first census, now chose Silesian identity. Until recently, in Opole Silesia, the only active Silesian organization was the German Minority. Since the previous census, the Silesian Autonomy Movement (RAŚ – Ruch Autonomii Śląska), related to the industrial area of Upper Silesia which belonged to Poland in the interwar period, became more active, as well as The Association of People of Silesian Nationality (SONŚ – Stowarzyszenie Osób Narodowości Śląskiej).

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The German minority and the movements for Silesian identity (Upper Silesia Association, Silesian Separatist Movement, ZLNŚ, RAŚ or SONŚ) clearly rival each other. The Germans do not support, and sometimes even counter, the Silesians' efforts to gain national or ethnic minority status, have their language acknowledged as regional or increase their autonomy.

At the foundation of such actions there lies a historical premise – the Silesian separatists (the so called 'Ślązakowcy') and the German minority have been competing for the favor of the same social group, the Silesians (Ślązacy). The indigenous population of Silesia is of Polish origin. Throughout the ages they have lived on the territories of different countries. They are characterized by diversified national identities. These communities have been formed by the reality characteristic of social borderlands. Within these areas, the processes related to the crossing of various civilization and cultural, linguistic, economic, demographic and political influences are much stronger. Those civilization and cultural circles and socio-political arrangements which, for various reasons, turn out to be more attractive or real for the locals, become dominant – temporarily or permanently. In practice, this means that while being a Silesian one can feel Polish-Silesian, German-Silesian, only Polish or only German. As a result, the stance of a significant part of the social borderlands remains unstable and uncrystallized.

Because of World War I and the Silesian uprisings, a part of Upper Silesia (about one sixth) was located within the Second Polish Republic, forming an autonomous Silesian Province. After the end of World War II, the majority of Silesians found themselves within the borders of the reborn Polish state, including the 420 thousand autochthonous Opole Silesians. Most of these people had to prove their Polish origin in order to stay in their homeland: national rehabilitation among Upper Silesians, the citizens of the Second Polish Republic who had the Volksdeutsch status in the years 1939-1945 and national verifications of those Silesians who were citizens of the Reich until 1945. Both groups had to file a declaration of allegiance to the Polish nation and state as 'people of Polish nationality'. It is estimated that 90% of the members of the German minority in Silesia are verified autochthons from Opole Silesia. As a result of advanced Germanization processes as well as the injustices and marginalization that they experienced during the times of the People's Republic of Poland, after 1989 many autochthons from Opole Silesia chose German nationality during the mass accession to the German minority organization. The Silesians in the industrial Upper Silesia manifest their aversion to Polishness by supporting the Silesian option.



The propagation of Silesian autonomy has been criticized from the very beginning by the German minority activists, who claimed that the Silesians are a German tribe. For that reason they warned the Polish government against acknowledging Silesian identity.

This rivalry for the Silesians is detrimental to the German minority. The systematically decreasing number of people declaring their German nationality points to that clearly. At the beginning of the 20th century, the German minority activists were talking about 800 thousand Germans. Polish and German scientists estimated this number to be about 300-500 thousand. According to the National Census from 2002, this number dropped to 153 thousand (including 107 thousand in the Opole Province – about 10% of its population and 32 thousand in the Silesia Province – 1% of its total population) to reach 109 thousand in 2011. The activists of the German minority did not hide their anxiety before the approaching census. They hoped that about 300 thousand people will declare German origin. The Council of Upper Silesian Germans (Rada Niemców Górnośląskich) appealed to the Germans living in the region to declare German nationality in the census: 'You don't have to speak German to be a German (...), because nationality is hereditary. Remember who your ancestors and parents were. Take this into consideration and bravely declare your nationality according to the way you feel.'

After the census was conducted, its credibility was questioned. The way in which the results were prepared was criticized, as well as the fact that it was not possible to compare them with the census from 2002 since the current census included only 20% of the Polish population. The Board of the Union of German Associations (Zarząd Związku Niemieckich Stowarzyszeń) stated, with regard to the results of the National Census from 26 March 2012, that the number of Germans did not go down. It was the perception of German identity that changed. The increased number of regional declarations was considered to be an increase in the potential number of people within the area of activity of the German minority, as the German culture and language is a part of Silesian identity. The authors of the statement acknowledge the growth of the Silesian option within the minority. They wrote: 'The Kashubian and Silesian declarations show strong relationships with their region and confirm the phenomenon characteristic for borderlands – national indifference. It is obvious that every German in Silesia, for example, is naturally also a Silesian.'

Accepting this type of argumentation, one can assume that it is legitimate to say that every Silesian is also naturally a Pole and every Pole living in Silesia is or can be a Silesian.

The support for the lists of the German minority has been going down for a long time, in both self-government and parliamentary elections. For example, the number of MPs



dropped from 7 to 1. In the election to Sejm in 2007, a candidate of the minority got only 32 thousand votes. In the self-government election from May 1990, the minority received 26.4% of votes, which is 74 thousand. After twenty years in the election in November 2010 it got 17.8% - 54 thousand votes.

The support of the Silesian community for the creation of German minority schools remains on the same relatively low level. It is referred to as the 'plastic minority', which loses its attractiveness.

It is estimated that in the Silesia and Opole Provinces – about 5.7 million people in total – there are about 1.2-1.5 million ethnic Silesians. Within the German minority, 80% declare that they use the Silesian language at home, 11% use German and 9% use Polish. This means that the members of the minority cultivate their Silesian identity, which is no longer something to be ashamed of.

Another important factor decreasing the influence of the German minority in Silesia is the foreign migration in search of work. In the nineties, the possibility to receive German nationality was a very attractive incentive and caused a mass accession to the minority (in 2002, 154 thousand people in the Opole Province and 80 thousand people in the Silesia Province got the so called red passport). It made it possible for them to work, among others, in Germany and the Netherlands. When Poland joined the EU and the Schengen Area, the membership in the minority ceased to be important. What used to attract people to the minority became a significant problem not only for the minority itself, but also for the whole Opole Silesia. It is estimated that 70-90 thousand people from the Opole Province now work abroad. Silesians constitute about 80% of these emigrant. This means that the region reached its emigration limit from the point of view of the demographic situation of the Silesian population (drop of birth rates, demographic deformations, aging population, euro-orphanhood and breakdown of families, deterioration of social ties). It is estimated that half of the younger Silesians of the German option work abroad. This, in turn, causes a decrease in the numbers of the German minority and those who support it. This results in a silent socio-demographic and cultural degradation in the Opole Province. The Silesians with double nationality are accused of this 'demographic catastrophe'. Another consequence of this situation is the aging of the members of the German minority and the systematic decrease in the attractiveness of German identity, especially for the young. Only every fifth member of the minority's organizations is below 44. Only 14% of the youth of the minority in Upper Silesia consider themselves to be German (16% in Opole Silesia). More than one third declared themselves to be Polish, the rest – Silesian. This means that youth is not interested in manifesting their German identity and the Silesian option provides them with full subjectivity.



The tendencies described above will continue to exert significant influence on the future of the German minority in Silesia and, as a result, in Poland as a whole. It might seem possible to speak about permanent and progressive decrease in the support for the German option among Silesians. It will gradually weaken the influence of the German minority at the local and regional level, mainly for the benefit of Silesian identity.

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