The German minority in contemporary Poland - from isolation to political relevance

In November 1989 German chancellor Helmut Kohl met with Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first non-communist head of the Polish government for over 40 years. This was rightfully seen as a turning point in Polish-German relations both in international politics and on the level of social-historical reconciliation (Szurlej, 2011). The meeting took place in Krzyżowa (Kreisau) in the borderland region of Lower Silesia, where during a Catholic mass both political leaders hugged each other as a sign of peace. But Kohl visited Poland not only to meet his Polish counterpart but also (and this preliminary the planed aim of the trip) to meet with representatives of the German minority in Poland. A crowd that met him in Krzyżowa was holding many signs, one of which read: “Helmut, du bist auch unser Kanzler” (Helmut, you are our chancellor too). A picture that awoke much unease among Polish politicians (Mazowiecki, 2009) and public opinion alike. It is difficult to imagine a better symbol for the complex issue that is the political situation of the German minority in Poland.

Statistics and legislation

According to the 2011 Polish National Census the German minority population accounts for 109 thousand people. This is significantly less then according to the 2001 census which indicated that the minority populations accounts for over 147 thousand people, making it still the biggest national/ethnic minority society in contemporary Poland. Both census were questioned by German and other national/ethnic minority organizations (flawless methodology). The leaders of the Germany minority suggest that the actual numbers are as high 500 thousand (Tuta, 2003). Most of the Polish Germans inhabit the Opole Silesia region (especially rural areas near Opole). There are also significant German minority groups living in other parts of Silesia (especially Upper – over 31 thousand according to the 2001 census) and the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (2 500 according to the 2001 census). The majority of Poland’s Germans live in the country site - 70,51 % (Second Report, 2007). The gender balance in similar to Polish national average (48,5% men, 51,5% women), the percentage of seniors (over 65 years of age form men and 60 for women) is twice as high as the national average (31% to 15%).

Poland ratified both the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages and created a network of institutions dealing with minority issues (the central role played by the Ministry of Administration and its department for national/ethnic minorities and religions). In regard to the German minority many provisions have been put into the Polish-German Good Relations Pact in 1991.

In 2005 the National and Ethnic Minorities and the Regional Language Act was passed by the parliament. The act defines national and ethnic minorities as groups which identify themselves with a nationality other than Polish, whose traditional settlement on contemporary Polish territories dates back at least 100 years. The act differences between “national” and “ethnic” minorities, the first having a national state (ex. Germans, Russians, Jews) and the second not having it (ex. Roma, Tatars). The act guaranties support for education and cultural
activities of national/ethnic minorities. In regard to public space it guarantees the possibility for local governments to install bilingual signs in settlement areas where the minority population is over 20%. In regard to the German minorities this has been established in villages and cities in 22 municipalities in the Opole and Silesia Voivodeships. The same number of municipalities uses German as a secondary language in administrative procedures (Annex No. 8 Second Report, 2007).

Polish Peoples Republic and the beginning of transition

The number, demographics and geographic settlement of the German minority in the III Polish Republic is one the many consequences of the end of World War II and the decision taken by the Great Powers in Yalta and Potsdam. The interwar Polish borders were “moved from East to West”- the Soviet Union (its three western republics o Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine to be precise) incorporated the eastern regions. As compensation the new Poland was given territories in the west (making Odra and Lusatia Neisse rivers its new borders) and in the north (most of the old German East Prussia province). Many of these territories had lost political ties to Poland as far in past as the middle ages and were mostly populated by Germans or/and communities of local cultural-linguistic borderland identities (Silesians, Kashubians, Masurians and Warmians; in many cases this identity was accompanied by a national: German/Polish one). The authorities of communist Poland adopted a strategy of total Polanisations of these territories, by driving out Germans and giving regional groups like the Silesians a possibility- either declare Polish nationality or leave. About 3 200 000 Germans were resettled from new Polish west and northeast territories to the Germany occupied zones.

In the first years after the war any kind of social or culture activity from those Germans who did not leave Poland was strictly forbidden (a decree date 13th of September 1946 excluded German nationals form the Polish society). The situation improve only after the establishment of the German Democratic Republic and the signing of the Polish-East German Good Neighboring Relations Pact in 1950. This enabled limited cultural and educational activities, as well as publishing the first German newspaper “Arbeiterstimme”. With the end of the Stalinist period a wave of “liberalization” came to Polish political life, opening new possibilities for minority communities, one of which was establishing associations. The German Social-Cultural Association (NTSK) was established in 1957. Nevertheless the Polish authorities publicly denied the existence of the German minority question and closely monitored the NTSK, blocking activities in many post-German areas, especially towards borderland societies, that were officially classified as ethnically Polish, like Silesians or Masurians. What is more this kind of policy was also implemented by the Polish Catholic Church, which took over many protestant churches in the new territories and openly ignored the question of German language mass for minority groups. Throughout the years many Polish Germans used the opportunities to migrate to the Federal Republic of Germany which decreased the number of local German populations as well as had a negative impact on its organizational development (those who migrated were often the most talented and educated; Domagała, 1995). By the end of the 70-tis the TSKN practically seized to exist.

A turning point came on the wave of the political turmoil at the beginning of the 80-tis in Poland. Until 1989 numerous attempts to register new independent German minority

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1 150 000 in the 60-tis, 125 000 in the 70-tis, 250 000 in the 80-tis (Zybura, 2001)
associates or cultural events took place. Although the Polish authorities and courts blocked this initiatives the background for the outburst of 1989/1990 was created.

As mentioned before for the Polish public opinion the issue of the German minority was practically non-existent. This is why what happened during the transformation years of 1989-1990 came as a surprise or even a shock. After the few unsuccessful attempts in the 80-ties, in November 1989, on the basis of a new democratic Act for Associations, a registration court in Katowice accepted the application for the registration of the Social-Cultural Association of German People in the Katowice Voivodship. This was followed by over 30 different German minority societies being set up, mostly in Silesia (Upper, Lower and Opole) as well as in the Warmian-Masurian region and Pomerania. To coordinate their actions the Central Council of German Societies (12.09.1990) and the Union of German Social-Cultural Associations in Poland [VdG] (27.09.1991) were established.

This dynamics was mostly due to great optimism of local societies, the effort of charismatic and energetic leaders, but was also supported and facilitated by the German state and German NGOs, mostly from the so called “expellees” (people who emigrated or were resettled from the new west and north Polish territories during or just after the war). The German state was ready to contribute large sums of many to support the organization development of Germans in Poland\(^2\) and also provided funds to local communities, towns and villages that were inhabited by Germans. Also many German municipalities were engaged in supporting Polish Germans, funding a brother/sister municipality in Poland and providing not only the local German minority but also sending gifts useful for the whole community (Domagała, 1995). An important role was played by the Landsmannschafts- expellees associations of former German provinces, joined in the Federation of Expellees (Bund der Vertriebenen- BdV). They were very well prepared to take an active part in the organizing process of local German minorities (one of the four major statutory aims) with significant funds ready and waiting (ibidem). To strengthen the organization potential of the local German community the Landsmannschafts organized seminars for association leaders in Germany (Czesla, 1992), engaged their own activists if necessary and also played a role in establishing relations with GFR municipalities and lands to provide other forms of aid.

**Parliamentary\(^3\) elections 1991-2011**

What was a social-cultural fact quickly became a political one, as the political system allowed Germans and other minorities to actively and freely participate in political life and create their own political agenda and organizations.

The “coming out of the shadows” of the Polish Germans in the form of setting up minority associations, created a political and institutional impulse for participating in local and parliamentary elections in 1990 and 1991 respectively. This started the process of the political institutionalization of the German minority in Poland.

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\(^2\) In the years 1990-2001 the German Federal Republic (GFR) supported the German minority in Poland with 250 million marks (Schape, 2002). These was in the period when the Polish minority act was not in power yet and the question of state support for minority communities was not yet fully resolved.

\(^3\) Polish parliament consists of two chambers: the lower (Sejm- 640 seats, a proportionate election system) and the upper (Senate- 100 seats, with the majority election system)
In 1991, in the first fully free elections to the Sejm and the Senate there were two German minority electoral comities (out to five minority comities, two others were Belarusian, the last one a mixed Ukrainian-Lithuanian-Czech-Slovak). The Central Council of German Associations in Opole set up the National Electoral Comity of the German Minority “German Minority”, while two associations from Upper Silesia organized the German Election Comity of the Katowice Region (PKW, 2012). The first one took part in the elections in nine constituencies winning 132,059 votes (1.18% of all the votes in the country) which gave it 7 seats in the Sejm. 82,000 votes gathered by Gerhard Bartodziej in the Opole constituency for the Senate elections won him a mandate, making the total result of the “German Minority” comity as high as 8 MPs. The results of the German Electoral Comity of the Katowice Region was in comparison very weak - 6,108 votes (0.05%) and no seats in the Sejm. The candidate for the Senate from this comity - Dietmar Brehman did better, gathering almost 130,000 votes, but this meant only 12% in the large constituency of Katowice and did not secure a seat in the Upper Chamber.

Because of changes in the election laws it was strategically better to register comities in constituency where inhabited by the German minority. That is way in 1993 elections there were five German minority comities, four that registered only in one constituency (Opole, Katowice, Częstochowa, Olsztyn) and one that registered candidates in the Katowice and the Gliwice constituency. The outcome was not as good as two years before - 110,454 votes, which meant 0.8% of all the votes. This secured a total of 4 seats in the Sejm. 3 of these came from the Opole constituency, where with 60,770 votes, the German minority took first places in the election (18.96% of all votes in the constituency). Gerhard Bartodziej was again the only one to secure a mandate in the Senate.

Also in the elections of 1997 the German minority presented its candidates through regional comities. A total of six of them registered 7 candidate lists (one comity in two constituencies, again creating competition in Katowice) in all the consistencies of the 1993 elections plus the constituency of Elbląg. Only the election comity of the Board of the Social-Cultural Society of Germans in Opole Silesia was successful in winning parliamentary seats (2 in the Sejm for Henryk Kroll and Helmut Paździor), their result - 51,027 votes and 16.96% gave them third place after the two biggest political forces of Poland at that time- The Election Action of Solidarity and the Alliance of the Democratic Left.

In total the German minorities von 79,963 votes in the Sejm elections. Two candidates for the Senate - Gerhard Bartodziej and Alojzy Kokota managed to get 22.3% and 16% of the votes in their constituencies respectively, which did not prove enough to secure a mandate.

In these elections the d’Hondt method was replaced by the Sainte-Lagué method. Also changes in constituencies borders were made (less bigger constituencies, 41 for the Sejm and 40 for the Senate). Greater requirements for election comities were imposed, like gathering a minimum 5000 signatures of support to register a candidate list for each constituency.

In 2001 elections there were only two national minority comities participating, both of them German: the Voters Electoral Comity “German Minority” and the Voters electoral Comity “German Minority of Upper Silesia”. The first one registered its lists in two constituencies of Opole and Rybnik and secured 42,340 and 4,890 of votes respectively. This was 12,99% and 2% of the support in the constituencies and 0.36% on the national scale. This gave the comity once again two mandates (Henryk Kroll and Helmut Paździor) from Opole. The Upper Silesia comity was able to obtain 8,024 votes (3.02% of the constituency votes and 0.06% national)
and for the third time this group did not win it any mandates. Three Senate candidates from the German minority received the support of 138,120 voters. This was as much as 43.95% on the constituency level - circa 15% each. Considering that in the Senate election each voter has three votes (for three mandates form the constituency) it did not prove enough to win a mandate (the weakest result out of the victors being 28.39%).

In the 2005 elections the German minority was once again the only one to have its own electoral comities. The Voters Electoral Comity “German Minority” limited itself to the Opole constituency this time securing 34,469 votes - 12.92% for the constituency and 0.26 nationally. This gave it once more two mandates (Henryk Kroll and Ryszard Galla). The second comity - the Voters Electoral Comity “German Minority of Silesia” in Gliwice, received 5,581 that is 2.41% for the constituency and 0.05% nationally. 3 Senate candidates von a total of 88,875 votes (33.24% of votes in the constituency, circa 10% each) which once again proved not to be sufficient.

In the next pre-time elections of 2007 the “German Minority” comity secured 32,462 votes, 8.81% in the constituency and 0.2% on the national level. This lead up to only one candidate securing a seat in the Sejm (Ryszard Galla). Three candidates for the Senate election in Opole received a total of 104,533 votes (28.18%) but the fact this support was divided - the former Opole constituency was divided into three singular mandate ones (so each candidate scored only a minimum over 9% each) none of them secured a mandate.

The 2011 elections brought the same outcome - one mandate for Ryszard Galla. The “German Minority” comity von 28,014 votes, that is 8.76% in the constituency and 0.19% nationally. Senate candidate Franciszek Kotyś took 2 place in his constituency with 19,968 votes and Józef Rash with 14,279 was third in his. Both of them did not secure a mandate in the new one-mandate Senate constituencies.

Local and regional elections 1990-2010

Since the first municipality elections in 1990 the German minority has been an active participant, creating its own local electoral comities or co-organizing them with other local NGOs or political forces in the Opole region. After the administration reform and the creation in 1998 of districts (powiat) and new regions (Voivodships), with their own local/regional legislatives and governments, the German minority took to becoming a relevant political force on those levels as well.

In 1990 the German minority won seats in councils of 40 municipalities of the Opole Voivodship (64 in total), in 26 it won the majority and had 15 head of local governments-mayors. In total German minority councilmen accounted for 26% of all municipality councilmen and had 29% seats in the Voivodship parliament (in the years 1990-1998 an advisory body consisting of delegates- municipality councilmen).

After the elections of 1994 the German minority had councilmen in 38 councils, keeping the majority in 26. The total number increased to 38% , the Voivodship parliament representations rose to 40%. 22 mayors were of German minority.
As mentioned earlier in the 1998 elections the German minority comities [GM] participated not only in the municipal but also district and Voivodship parliament elections. The administrative changes seemed not to have weakened the minority’s position significantly, as its comities won a total of 31% of councilmen mandates and 30% of the district mandates. The German minority won the majority in 28 municipalities (out of 71 in the new Opole Voivodship) and in 3 districts (out of 11). Out of 45 seats in the Opole Parliament 13 (29%) were won by the German minority comity.

In 2002 the German minority won seats in 39 municipalities and obtained 26% of all the mandates. On the district level its comities won 27% of all the mandates, having placed representatives in 7 out 11 district councils (the majority in 3). 54,385 (18.61%) votes were won for the Opole Parliament list, which gave the GM 7 seats (out of 30).

In the 2006 election the German minority won seats in 7 out 11 district councils (majority in 2) taking 25.7% of all the mandates. In five this enabled them to point out the head of executive of the district (starosta). The GM took mandates in 40 Opole municipalities, winning the majority in 28 and 31 mayors (elected directly). With 49,131 (17.3%) the GM was once again able to secure 7 out 30 seats in the Opole Parliament.

In the local elections of 2010 the GM gained 278 councilmen mandates and 24 mayor mandates, as well as 22.9% of all seats in district councils, keeping the strongest positions in two and pointing out the head of the executive in 3. With the result of 53,670 (17.7%) votes, 6 out of 30 seats in the Opole Parliament belong to the GM.

Since the first regional elections the GM has been in the governing coalition in the Opole Parliament being able to form an agreement with parties form the right [Election Action of Solidarity, Civil Platform], center [Liberty Union, Polish Peoples Party] and the left [Alliance of the Democratic Left]. A representative of the GM has been in each regional government, with Ryszard Galla from the GM being head of the government [Marshal] for a period of time in 2002.

**Overall view and trends**

The analysis of the election results in the past 20 years show the process of the political institutionalization of the German minority to be very dynamic but also very diverse. On the national level the German minority started its political activity with a strong accent- winning 7 seats in the Sejm [more than enough to create a Deputy Group – *pol. Koło Poselskie*] and one in the Senate. This was, after the dynamic process of minority associations registration and the outcome of the municipal elections in Silesia, another great surprise to Polish public opinion. The German minority political representation seemed adequate to the number of the minority population. This is was an significant achievement, compared to other minorities—especially the Belarusians (one MP in 1991) and the Ukrainians (none). The result was possible even despite some division between within the minority, which resulted in competing comities in Katowice. On the other hand the election law that was in power at that time, especially the method for allocating seats, was favorable to small political forces. The elections of 1993 did not provide such a good turnout for the German minority. Nevertheless it was able to maintain its Deputy Group in the Sejm and renew the Senate mandate. At that

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4 With no threshold it made the Polish Sejm at that time a chamber with almost 30 different political groups. This fragmentarisation was also one of the reasons for the early elections in 1993.
point the weaker result could be viewed as a result of the changed election law. To avoid the fragmentarisation from 1991 the new election act introduced the d’Hont method with a 5% threshold. National minority comities where excluded from the threshold requirement on one of two fields- the constituency level or the national list level, the choice that had to be made upon registration. This election law change was the beginning of the process of stabilizing the Polish party system, a process that favored big and strong political players.

In comparison with the Ukrainians and Belarusians the German minority seemed very strong- the associations of these minorities did not organize any minority comities, deciding to cooperate with left and center Polish parties.

Experts and scholars agree that the results from 1991 and 1993 were possible thanks to the enthusiasm of members of the German minority. Enthusiasm which was transferred into hard work on behalf of the electoral comities. For many German communities these first Polish democratic elections were an important element of becoming a subject instead of an object of social, economical and political process. A lot of them truly believed that “taking matters into their own hand” (Budzińska, 2002) would result in the significant improvement of their life, whether on the social-cultural or social-economical level. The support coming from Germany also played an important role. Of course the financial aid coming from the German public authorities did not go the electoral comities directly, it was however sent to German minority associations who where the organization basis for these comities. The money coming from the German Ministry of Interior was used to establish numerous local associations, giving possibilities to fund equipment, office space and travel cost for coordinators. In many cases this aid facilitated the dynamic outburst of local German minority activism. It would be a mistake to assume that the German minority as a social and political power was created by funds provided form the Federal Republic of Germany. But these funds in many cases were essential for a initiative group to reach another higher organization level. A level from which political activism was possible. The role of aid coming form the Landsmanschafts was also important as in may communities their representatives played a key role in organizing basic minority association structures, when there was no reliable local leader (Domagała, 1995).

What also proved very advantages, especially in the Opole region, was the fact that the minority settlements were not stretched around the region and in many areas most of the population are Polish Germans. These areas are the GM “strongholds” in municipal and district election, and are the hart of the support in regional and parliament elections.

In comparison, the other national minorities were not privy to such good conditions. Both Belarusians and Ukrainians could not count on any big support from the national states of Belarus and Ukraine (not to mention NGOs). These were young countries with a economic potential far weaker than that of FRG. They also did not have any institutions or traditions in providing aid for their national minorities abroad. Whereas the German state had a long traditions in providing support of German minority group as well as incorporating the issue within its foreign policy agenda (Sierpowski, 1986). Unlike the German minority the Ukrainians are very much scattered around Poland, especially the northern part (Warmia-Mazury, West Pomerania)\(^5\). Without a region like Opole for the German minority, forming a political representation, that would be independent for Polish national parties proved impossible, thus moving the Ukrainian social-political leaders to closely cooperate with the

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\(^5\) This is a due to a deliberate resettlement policy by the Polish Peoples Republic authorities- the “Vistula Action” of 1947, which was to destroy the backbone of the Ukrainian Uprising Army (UPA), the Ukrainians moved from borderland south-east territories were to be placed in communities that are not close to each other.
center-right (Democratic Union, Liberty Union and then Civil Platform). The Belarusian minority did have the advantage of not being scattered and inhabiting one region—Podlasie. In this case however an other important factor proved to play a significant role. The Belarusian minority was in a far better position in the Polish Peoples Republic then for example the Germans or Ukrainians. They were not considered a political threat and their national identity was not highly developed, with their difference from the majority being mostly connected with the religion (Orthodox). The communist authorities in the region showed significant to loyal leaders and institutions, using this as an element of local political strategy. This is one of the reasons why after the transformation the post-communist Democratic Leftwing Alliance was the party that Belarusians look to as their political protector. This strong position eventually evaluated into political dominance landing any other local Belarusian groups in the political orbit of the party (Palade, 2011). This kind of relation did not occur to a significant extent with any German regional community.

The 1997 election brought forth a much weaker outcome for the German minority with 30 thousand votes less and a result below 100 thousand. The number of won seats (2) would repeat itself in the next two elections (2001, 2005) then decreasing to one (2007, 2011). In every next election the number of votes was smaller, falling down to 28 thousand in the last, 2011 elections. The process, called by some a political deinstitutionalization on the national level (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2003), did not seem to take place on the Opole regional level. The elections of 1997 also shown that outside of Silesia the political potential of the German minority is not significant enough to obtain political relevance. The aim of winning a seat for a parliamentary representative of the Germans from Warmian-Mazurian region, set by the local leader Walter Angrik proved to be unrealistic (Czesła, 1998).

On local and regional levels the results did not suffer such a decline when comparing the first elections with the later ones. In each election the German minority comities were able to secure more than a quarter of the total number of mandates in municipality councils and (since 1998) in the district councils. Not less than one third of mayors come from German minority lists. Being able to reach an agreement with most of the political powers (parties or other comities) the German minority is also able to obtain seats in the district collective executive. Since the first regional elections in 1998, the German minority is the co-governing force in the Opole Regional Parliament, keeping a stable representation level (20-30%) in the number of seats and being able to agree a coalition with different political parties.

The decline of political support in national elections has many reasons. In the beginning of the 90-ties the German minority comities had the advantage of being something politically new and original, also with the attribute of relating to regional and local issues. This also came together with high hopes and expectations which the political representatives had to met. A matter very problematic considering having only as much as 7 Sejm members out of 640. The German minority communities, having among it many elders, pensioners and people inhabiting the countryside expected not only cultural and language issues to be resolved, but also those connected with their social and economic situation (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2003). Just like many people joined German minority associations because of their role a quasi welfare institutions (Domagała, 1995), many supported the German electoral comities hoping for changes that will improve the social-economical situation in their local societies. This problem was not privilege to German minority political representation forces. The associations themselves faced a problem of not meeting expectations and there for started

6 In the presidential elections of 1990 the SLD candidate Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz won in the Belarusian dominated areas, where as on the national level he received only 9% of the votes.
losing their dynamic in the second half of the 90-ties, one of the reasons being that new people, especially the young, could not find their place in the settled and sometimes very bureaucratic hierarchy (ibidem). The last significant reason are the demographic issues. Most of the supporters and organizers of the German minority “rebirth” movement and voters for the GM election comities were seniors, people who were educated in German schools before 1945. Naturally year by year the numbers of these groups decrease. The minority associations were not able to mobilize and attract young people within their ranks (Berlińska, 1999) which could not have a positive impact on the image and agenda in regard to the young and its problems. The same candidates in the following elections did not appeal to the young (Zybura, 2001). An other subject that seemed to disappoint was the German state. It appears that the regional communities expected much more economic aid from the FRG in the economic transformation process. Not meeting these expectations did not help German minority comities in keeping or increasing their political support (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2003). The other demographic aspect is the labor migration to Germany. At basis of art. 116 of the German constitution a great number of Germans living in Poland obtained FRG citizenship (Kamusella, 2003) The total number is estimated at about 200 000 75% of them from Opole Silesia. One of the main advantages of this double citizen status was the possibility to work in Germany without restriction (a right that all Polish citizen obtained as late as 2011). This created a situation in which many Polish Germans choose emigration to escape unemployment or searching for better job and life standards. Many of those who worked as seasonal workers on farms were absent during elections which usually take place in Autumn.

No doubt the political outcome of the first years would have been better where it for divisions within the movement. The election competition in the Katowice region was a direct result of a conflict between minority leader Dietmar Brehmer and the other members of Central Council of German Societies. Brehmer took on a “pro-Polish” position and opposed strong influences from the BdV from Germany7. Eventually this issue ceased being the dominant problem in the years to come8, but no doubt, in the crucial to time of the first half of the 90-tis, it worked against the German minority, not only dividing it, but also making a lot of potential supporters skeptical of the movement.

The political position of the German minority on the local and regional level in the Opole region did not suffer such a decline through the years. This seems to have to connected with the social but also political specific of the municipality/district/voivodship level. In municipalities were the German minority is numerous is has been so strongly rooted within the local political structure system, that any significant changes will happen as an effect of long term process. In regard to other political powers the German minority shows very much flexibility and willingness to cooperate. The situation in the Opole Parliament, where GM politicians were able to sign coalition agreements with different political parties is a perfect example. This kind of attitude, where the interest of the local/regional national group dominates over any other political or ideological issue, is also implemented on in the municipalities and districts, after as well as before the elections- meaning that local GM candidates often go to the elections under the banner of a wider local electoral comity.

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7 This conflict also appeared between Warmia-Mazury associations, Waler Angrik the German minority leader of Olsztyn aimed at creating a great north Poland network of German societies that would not copy structures of the East Prussian Landsamtschaft and met with strong opposition from activists who wanted to work in close cooperation with the German “expellees”

8 The confirmation of Polish-German borders in the pact of 1991 has “taken the wind out of BdV supporters in Poland”(Zybura, 2001, p. 230).
Many municipalities hold most of the burden of social, cultural and infrastructural development of their communities on their shoulders and in many cases are seen as the only public institutions that work for the benefit of the population (Mackiewicz, 2010). This is especially the fact since European Union structural funds became available. These funds, distributed by regional authorities and used by municipalities and districts improved living conditions for the local population, strengthening the position of local leaders. Local authorities are often perceived as not being so prawn to senseless conflicts and political games. This kind of positive picture perpetuates the political landscape on the local level. In cases of the Opole societies it seems that minority local leaders tend to make flexibility and being open to compromise as their political characteristic. The German minority leaders stress, that the municipalities govern or co-govern by their colleges achieve the best result in obtaining EU development funds and that one of the keys to this success is the lack of conflicts within the municipality councils (Świerc, 2010).

**Polish political discourse and German minority issue**

The “rebirth” of the German minority in 1990 came not only as a surprise but also rose many concerns and even fear in the Polish public opinion, especially in the so called “reclaimed lands”- former German territories that were incorporated into Poland after 1945. The communist authorities developed the fear of German territorial revisionism among people who settled on post-German lands, as means to secure their support and the party’s legitimism (the alliance with the Soviet Union was always presented as a guaranty of Polish borders in the west). This fear did not disappear entirely after the political transformation of 1989/90. The activities of German associations and participation in the elections created much turmoil in public discourse (Die Deutschen in Polen…, 2010), especially in rightwing and nationalist media.

Ultimately it was not the results of the German minority comities in the election (which were achieved by legal and fair means) but another issue that created the main hostilities between the Polish majority and the German minority. This was the conflict around historic and sentimental symbols in the public domain.

In the first half to the XX century, before the end of world war II, the region of Silesia faced a process of utter Germanization of the public domain, which meant elimination of Slavic/Polish names of settlements and geographic features. These process were especially dynamic after the end of world war I and in the Nazi period. After 1945 the region faced a totally different process of de-Germanization in the public domain and forcing the German language into the underground. Eliminating German names and signs went as far as cemeteries and churches. With the rebirth movement of the German minority the issue of the symbols of the public domain in Silesia returned and proved to be the most problematic in the regional Polish-German relations. The leaders of the German minority, mostly seniors advocated successfully for the associations to take up activities that would lead to the recreation of the “sentimental landscape” from their childhood past. This was not only a purely sentimental, but also an act of strengthening the German Silesians ethnicity, by confirming the *Haimat* (the small fatherland) in the sphere of the public domain (Nijakowski, 2006). This aim created numerous controversy, especially when the recreation process would also include military symbolism and names from the 1933-1945 period. Similar controversies arose around the issue of bilingual public sings in villages and towns inhabited by the German minority. According to public opinion polls (OBOP) conducted in April 2001 and May 2005 over 60% of Poles responded negatively (61 and 63 respectively) to bilingual signs. The
passing of the minority act in 2005 eventually initiated a process of settling the bilingual sings issue. The matter of symbols in the public domain was, in the course of the past two decades more problematic. 

In 1992 a wide discussion about the restoration of old German statues and monuments by minority communities in Opole Silesia started (the so called “third statue war”). At that time these actions were seen by many as a demonstration of German nationality and turning away form the Polish one (Nijakowski, 2006). The Polish public opinion could not accept the restoration of the iron cross symbolic in the cases of villages like Wędrynia and Januszkowice (used on monuments combatting soldiers from different periods), seeing it as a heritage of Prussian/German imperialism and nationalism. For the German minority this was seen as part of their historical identity and not being able to restore such monuments was seen as a limitation of cultural rights. For seniors, many of which were brought up in schools during the Nazi period, when the military symbolic and special homage to those who died for the Fatherland where wildly propagated (Berlińska, 1997) these symbols were an essential part of monuments to soldiers. Even though the regional administration wanted to find a compromise and established a special comity to analyze and give opinion in each individual case, this was still seen as intervention within the symbolic sphere (Nijakowski, 2006). As was the resolution Polish Council of Commemoration and Homage to Brave Soldiers of 1995 that stated that the symbol of the iron cross, Nazi-period names and using the term “gefallen” (fallen) in regard to Wehrmacht soldiers on monuments is not acceptable. In 2002 an other serious conflict arose around the statue of Saint George Szczedrzyk–Nowa, where on a one of the signs and old Nazi period name „Hitlersee” (Hitler’s Lake) was used and, as it would seem, was never a matter of concern for the local German population. This fact was widely discussed by the Polish press. Political forces on the right used this a symbol of disloyalty (Świercz, 2003) on the German minority side, while the local Germans see this as an exaggeration and a pretext to start a anti-German campaign. As resolute a special commission created by the Opole Voivodship government (coalition of the Democratic Left Alliance and the German Minority) decides on covering the controversial word. 

In 2003 the minster for the Opole Voivodship (wojewoda, representing the national government of the regional level) Elżbieta Rutkowska declared that during the year all statues and monuments that bare symbols that violated the 1995 Resolution would be changed. She launched a campaign in which she visited local municipalities and advocating that symbols of the iron cross, Nazi-period names and the “gefallen” term are in violation of the law. This eventually proved very successful and all but one controversial signs were changed. This did not happen only in Mechnice. The conflict which arose there in 2004 was around a monument commemorating soldiers of world war I, built in 1936. The statue had many German military symbols but was not much destroyed after 1945. In 1993 the Social-Cultural Association of the German Minority from Opole funded an additional sign, explaining its aim and history in German and Polish languages. It also used the Nazi-period name of the village “Moosdoff”. The local population did not see the problem with using this name saw the persistence with which the wojewoda acted on this issue, demanding it be changed, as an symbolic attack of the Polish administration against the German minority. 

In 2005 the German minority leader Henryk Kroll received an answer from the Polish Ombudsman in which he stated that the 1995 Resolution was not legally bidding, as the

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9 There were 67 different cases of local conflicts (Nijakowski & Szteliga, 2005)
Council is not an institution that can give out such acts (Ogiolda, 2005). Ultimately this issue returned and accusations arose that this just a pre-election campaign by Kroll and future GM candidates, and that they are trying to destroy a relatively peaceful status that emerged after 2005. Although the status quo remained unchanged after this event it is still unsure whether and in what form this issue will once again become a problem in the regional Polish-German relations.

The German minority after the transformation of 1989/1990 was able to achieve significant and stable political relevance in the Opole region as well as a symbolic but not meaningless position on the national level. This was possible due to numerous factors as well as political and social circumstances that accrued, especially during the first decade of the III Polish Republic. It is still uncertain what kind of processes, both political and social the future holds for the German minority communities. It is a face the German minority organization are still searching for a formula of activism that would be most effective in contemporary times. Activism that must focus on issues like education and cultural activities strengthening the ethnic identity (Ogiolda, 2010), especially of the younger generation (Entwicklungsstrategie, 2010). They also need to find a answer to the development of Silesian regionalism, that seems to in some way a “competition” to strictly German ethnic identity (Sakson, 2011). These are the present day challenges for German minority organizations and their leaders. Although in many fields they can demand support from the Polish state and still can ask for the aid form the German state and the German third sector, the depends mostly on their own work and strategy.

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