

## **Policy on Minority and Regional Languages in Poland**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Europe's identity is based primarily on its cultural heritage. A particularly significant element of culture, which is decisive for social identity, is language. Analogously, a minority's language is an important element of culture of a given ethnic and national group.

A specific language constitutes a symbolical expression of tradition and culture of a particular geographical territory. Language was created when cultures encompassed compact, separate and not intermingling spaces. Homogeneity of cultures resulted in separate linguistic systems, whose identity rested on typical, essential for a given language grammatical and intonation system and lexical resources. Besides isolation also intermingling of cultures results in numerous dialects, often far from what is considered to be a so called standard language. Therefore, there can appear significant deviations from standard language, however, thanks to linguists, they can be localised with reference to the pattern, which maintains its identity shaped by tradition of many hundred years.<sup>1</sup>

In Poland, as well as in other European countries, what is being observed nowadays is a renaissance of regional cultures and attitudes favourable towards the languages of both ethnic and national minorities and regional communities.

There are a few aspects to the issue of languages of national, ethnic and national minorities residing in Poland. They can be described in both grammatical and socio-linguistic respect. They can be characterized in terms of their geopolitical situation. Finally, their historical development as well as present diffusion and presence in public life can be examined. I shall begin with general description of minority and regional languages in Poland.

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<sup>1</sup> CZYKWIN Elzbieta, MISIEJUK Dorota . *Dwujęzyczność i dwukulturowość w perspektywie pedagogicznej*, Trans Humana, Białystok, 1998, p. 74.

## **II. Linguistic situation of Poland.**

Despite slender population of people who are ethnically non-Polish and do not speak Polish as their mother tongue (they are estimated to number approximately 1,2 million people, which constitutes about 3 per cent of all inhabitants of the country) Poland is (as far as general number of minority groups is concerned) one of the most multi-ethnic and multi-lingual countries in Europe.

The list of languages which are used by the citizens of the Republic of Poland groups idioms of various socio-linguistic status. There is among them Kashubian language on the one hand, regional language doubtlessly the most vivid and practised as mother tongue by over 350-500 thousand people, and Karaim or Grabar language (the language of Old Armenian) on the other hand – languages of ethnic and religious minorities existing in fact only in the written form and not used by more than just a few people. Separately should be considered dialects of the Polish language, those practised commonly in particular regions such as Spis or Oravian dialect, which is also mother tongue of Slovakian minority living in Polish Spis and Polish Orava, or Silesian dialect – mother tongue of Silesians as well as of those declaring German nationality.

It should be pointed out that there are communities residing in distinct geographical regions, for example Silesian in Silesia, which demonstrate weaker sense of ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity than either minorities inhabiting territories which are not clearly defined, for example Kashubians or Byelorussians, or living in diaspora and not occupying a distinct territory, such as Ukrainians after post-war displacements.

For the purpose of this presentation the stance of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages has been adopted that “regional or minority languages” means languages that are “traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State’s population and different from the official language of that State”.<sup>2</sup> This approach excludes the language of immigrants, requires however including the history of Poland from linguistic point of view.

Ability to survive of any minority or regional language, which are also called historical languages of Poland, depends in the first place on its resistance to influences

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<sup>2</sup> Article 1, point a - *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, Council of Europe, ETS n° 148, Strasbourg, 5. IX. 1992.

occurring in the historical process and on how much it is rooted on its territory of existence.

There are 15 autochthonous minority languages in Poland: Byelorussian, German, Silesian, Kashubian, Lithuanian, Gypsy (Romany), Slovak, Czech, Ukrainian, Lemkish, Russian (Old Believers) and Yiddish, Karaim, Grabar – the language of Old Armenian and Tatar. The following table enumerates these languages, indicates estimated population figures, localises them territorially as well as provides selected information on the language situation and mother tongue (Table 1).

On the territory of the Republic of Poland the following languages of ethnic and national minorities and regional communities, grouped in three big linguistic categories, can be distinguished:<sup>3</sup>

**1. Regional languages:** languages used by particular indigenous ethnic groups, often closely related to the languages of majority (which makes their linguistic status a debatable issue) or being dialects of official languages. They do not have the status of official languages. In this group of languages can be included: Kashubian, Lemkish, Silesian dialect. Some groups and social movements demand applying to certain dialects rules defined for “minority” languages, for example Lemkos, Kashubs, Silesians.

**2. Minority languages:** languages of national groups whose state is beyond the territory of a given country and possess therefore their normalized standard varieties which are official languages of other countries. For Poland this type of languages are: Byelorussian, Czech, Lithuanian, German, Slovak, Russian (Old Believers), Ukrainian. In this group are also included languages not having the status of official state languages, not genetically related to the language of majority and used by indigenous groups inhabiting their ethnic territory on the territory of another state.

**3. Diaspora languages:** used by ethnic and national groups not possessing their territory in Europe, living among majority groups for so long that they begin to resemble indigenous people. If the languages of contemporary immigrants are taken into consideration, in Poland this type of languages are: Yiddish, Gypsy – Romany, Karaim, Grabar – the language of Old Armenian and Tatar.

Is there a place in Europe for people using Kashubian, Lemkish or Romany language? To what extent do the Polish authorities recognize as significant regional values, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Compare with European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and GIORDANI Henri. *Droits des minorités, droits linguistiques, Droits de l'Homme* dans "Les minorités en Europe. Droits linguistiques et droits de l'Homme", Paris, Éditions Kimé, 1992, pp. 9-39.

language and culture of the inhabitants, in their policy on development of a given region? These are the central questions which I am trying to tackle in this article.

### **III. Legal status.**

Legal issues connected with the existence of minority languages in Poland should be treated as the most important, as legal regulations and their observance are decisive for the range of their usage (and thus for conditions of development) of minority languages.

Linguistic liberties of the citizens of the Third Republic of Poland who form national, ethnic and regional minorities depend on the legal regulations which are included in international legislation, legal situation resulting from the treaties, which Poland signed with neighbouring countries and internal legal documents.

Presently the European Council is discussing further steps in the enlargement of the European Union. The accession negotiations with Poland were concluded at the European Council in Copenhagen on 12-13 December. However the Accession Treaty should be signed in Athens in April 2003. Therefore of primary importance is investigation of the Polish attitude as regards the European legislation in the field of linguistic rights (especially two documents of the Council of Europe will be considered: *the European Charter of Minority and Regional Languages* and *the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*).

*European Charter of Minority and Regional Languages* (on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November of 1992) does not use the terminology of "rights and liberties" typical for other documents from the field of human rights protection, since the Charter does not protect neither ethnic (national) groups nor people belonging to them but "regional or minority languages". It stipulates in its detailed resolutions these realms of social life, in which a minority or regional language can be used.

A state has got the right to specify in the ratification document the languages for which it has assumed responsibilities. According to the article 15-16 of the charter states-parties are obliged to present at specified intervals reports on their policy on regional and minority languages to the Secretary General of the European Council, which are then examined by a special committee of experts. Poland has not signed nor ratified this document.

Poland has signed however *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February of 1995 (as one of the first twenty countries), and ratified

it on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December of 2000. The first report on the execution of the Convention's resolutions was submitted by Poland at the beginning of July of 2002.

It is difficult to point to one specific reason for the delays in the ratification of this Convention by Poland. Fundamental and beneficial changes in the policy on minorities as well as in the legal system were done already in the first half of the 90s. Currently Polish legal system, both on the national level and on the level of international commitments, establishes protection of people belonging to ethnic and national minorities, which is generally equivalent to the guaranties put forward by this Convention. There are though rules included in the Convention which are not reflected in the Polish law. The most important are:

- prohibition of actions aiming at assimilating national minorities
- using the language of a minority privately publicly, using the language of a minority outside official institutions, right to put private inscriptions in the language of a minority and right to hang out traditional local names, names of the streets and other public topographic signs in the language of a minority
- obligation to resist actions changing nations' proportions in the regions inhabited by national minorities
- educational rights which concern spreading knowledge about minority's culture, training teachers for schools of national minorities, access to textbooks in the language of national minorities.

These issues are regulated in the Parliament's project of the Bill on national and ethnic minorities, which is now on the agenda in Parliament.

There is currently work being carried out on Polish legal regulations concerning linguistic liberties of national minorities. The Bill on national and ethnic minorities has not yet been passed, despite the fact that already on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1998 Parliamentary Commission on Ethnic and National Minorities undertook legislative initiative.

Article 35 of the Constitution between other things guarantees all Polish citizens belonging to national and ethnic minorities "*liberty to maintain and develop their own language*". Secondary Acts regulate so far in the proper way the issue of teaching minority languages. The bill from the 7<sup>th</sup> September of 1991 about educational system obliges public schools "*to afford possibilities for pupils to maintain their sense of national, ethnic, linguistic and religious identity*" and especially to instruct language...whereas this instruction may take place in "separate groups, departments, schools", "groups, departments, schools with

facultative instruction in language, history and culture”, “in inter-school groups of instruction”.

Decree of the Ministry of National Education from the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1992 extends this obligation also on nurseries and allows of possibilities of submitting applications by interested pupils, explicitly stipulates the rule of voluntary participation, allows of bilingual certificates, stipulates the minimum number of interested pupils, necessary when creating classes.

Development of educational system is a sign that there is sufficient protection exists, however in the face of meagre financing and employment there may be for example instances of refusals to employ teachers of national languages or extreme situations such as instruction in barracks in the II Lyceum with Ukrainian language in Górow Hawecki.

Basically using foreign language in the court while testifying or during interrogation of witnesses is possible, as well as communication between the defendant and the court. A precondition though is lack of knowledge of the Polish language and not membership to a national or ethnic minority.

The right to register name and surname according to the writing rules of one’s mother tongue is included in the project of the Bill on national and ethnic minorities.

Suggestions concerning the issue of putting names of towns and streets in foreign language as well as inscriptions on public offices are tackled in the project of the Bill on national and ethnic minorities.

#### **IV. Conditions of development of minority and regional languages.**

Regional and minority languages on the territory of Poland differ according to their level of development, which is determined by numerous linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. To the first group of factors belong in the first place numerical force and organizational state of the minority itself. The first is low in the case of Jews, Czechs and Old Believers. Yiddish and Czech are languages practically disappearing in our country because of continuously diminishing number of their users, Old Believers’ dialect will probably still last, considering the well-known attachment of this group to religious traditions.

In the case of less numerous minorities a thing decisive for the development or its absence is whether there exists a state which may act as a background for the minority and assist in the maintenance and development of the language. Minorities having such a background are Germans in the first place, who receive a substantial support, and

Lithuanians, Slovaks, Ukrainians. Exceptional is the situation of Byelorussians, whose state does not really care for the development of the Belorussian language. Therefore Polish Belorussians must take care for their linguistic interests themselves, as well as Lemkos, who do not have their own country. The latter must furthermore overcome the resistance of Ukrainians towards their emancipation.

Of similar importance for the maintenance and development of a language can be the Church. For a long time it has promoted cultivation of the Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Lemkish language (model example is the situation of the Old Believers dialect, Karaim language and the language of Polish Armenians and Tatars), however neither Byelorussian nor German language has found support in it – in the first case the language is as a result threatened in its existence, for the second the situation has changed only recently. For a longer period of time Slovaks had problem with using mother tongue in the church.

The second group of factors are socio-linguistic conditions. First should be observed the situation of nationalities, which – having a particular national identity – do not use their mother tongue in everyday communication (Polish Germans and Slovaks), because they have lost the ability to use it. They have either for a long time or always used dialects of other languages in everyday life (for instance Silesian or Spis-Oravian dialects). Therefore they are learning it. Another, more frequent situation is when members of a minority learn a given language in its standard variant and use its dialect in everyday communication (Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Byelorussians). The third is situation when dialect which has been used hitherto gains or has gained the status of standard language (Lemkos) or remains primary language of a group without taking shape of a codified language (Romany). It depends though on inherent qualities of a given language, namely the third condition.

There is then the case of Romany language, which has only just started to exist in Poland in the written form and is therefore far from codification and plays exclusively the role of a language of everyday communication (however it is not threatened in its functioning). On the other hand the first possibilities of codification come into being only when a language becomes a written language and begins to serve as a platform of communication for various secluded groups of a given community (introducing mass media on a larger scale). Even preliminary codification creates further possibilities of introducing a language to schools (which perfectly increases the number of its users and promotes survival) – what the Lemkos are fighting for nowadays. The next qualitative

threshold of development is passing from the role of a language which is exclusively being taught to the language of instruction. Education with national languages of instruction have presently in Poland Ukrainians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Germans (rather private).

Full development of a language (in respect of development of all levels of vocabulary) can bring only its unlimited usage in scientific, economic and administrative institutions (and this situation is the objective of *the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*). Those Polish minorities whose language is official language of the neighbouring countries can use in an unlimited ways its forms created elsewhere, although they are deprived of proper possibilities to contribute to this development. The situation is worse for those minorities which do not have their own countries (Lemkos) or these are not countries which care for the national language (Byelorussians).

Perhaps as a compensation Byelorussian and Lemkish minorities in Poland are more active in the field of literature.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The Republic of Poland has been for a few years member of the Council of Europe and is making efforts to gain admission to the European Union. European Union's rules of policy on languages recognize all languages as equal and minority and regional languages are legally protected. After admission of Poland to the European Union Polish language will undoubtedly obtain the status of its official language, whereas the catalogue of minority and regional languages will significantly increase. It will be a huge financial and legal burden, both for the whole Union and its member-states. On the other hand Poland will be legally bound to observe European standards of protection and promotion of minority and regional languages. The question how the countries of European Union solve their own dilemmas of bilingualism and multiculturalism seems to be an important issue not only from theoretical point of view. Along with the enlargement to the East European Union will be enriched with over 40 new minority languages. It is not known whether protection of all of them will be possible. And without it they will be doomed to extinction. It would be a huge loss for the cultural heritage of Europe.

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**Table 1. Autochthonous Minority Languages in Poland**

<b>Language/ dialect</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Population (approx. in thousands)</b>	<b>Territorial localisation</b>
<b>Byelorussian</b> (Slavonic language)	Byelorussians (NM)	200–300	Podlaskie Voivodeship
<b>Czech</b> (Slavonic language)	Czechs (NM)	3	Voivodships: Dolnośląskie (Zelów), Lubelskie, Łódzkie
<b>German</b> (German language)	Germans (NM)	300-500	Voivodships: Opolskie, Śląskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie
<b>Grabar</b> (language of Old Armenian) in liturgy	Armenians (NM)	5-8	Dolnośląskie and Małopolskie Voivodship, (Kraków, Warszawa, Wrocław, Bielsko-Biała, Gdańsk, Silesia region)
<b>Gypsy/ Romany language</b>	Gypsies (EG)	20-30	The Małopolskie Voivodship, mainly dispersed
<b>Karaim</b>	Karaims (EG)	0. 2	dispersed - Warszawa, Kraków, Opole, Gdańsk, Wrocław
<b>Kashubian</b> (dialect of polish, regarded by some as a separate Slavonic language)	Kashubs (GE)	350-500	Pomerania region, between Gdańska and Słupsk, with centers in Wejherowio, Kartuzy, Kościerzyna, Wiele
<b>Lithuanian</b> (Baltic language)	Lithuanians (NM)	20-25	Biała Podlaska Region/ Voivodeship (Sejny region in northeasternmost corner of Poland), Warszawa, Wrocław

<b>Lemkish</b> (dialect of Ukrainian, regarded by some as a separate language)	Lemkos (EG)	60-70	Voivodeships: Małopolskie (Beskidy Niski and Sądecki mountains), Podkarpackie, Dolnośląskie, Warmińsko-mazurskie, Lubuskie, Zachodniopomorskie
<b>Russian Old Believers language</b> (archaic Russian and Polish dialect)	Russian Old Believers (MN)	10-15	Voivodships: Podlaskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie,
<b>Silesian</b> (dialect of Polish)	Silesians (RG)	?	Silesia and OpoleSilesia regions
<b>Slovak</b> (Slavonic language)	Slovaks (NM)	10-20	Małopolskie Voivodship (Spis and Orava regions)
<b>Tatar</b> (Arabic with Turkic) used in liturgy	Tatars (EG)	5	Podlaskie Voivodeship (villages Bohoniki i Kruszyniany)
<b>Ukrainian</b> (Slavonic language)	Ukrainians (NM)	200-300	Voivodships: Dolnośląskie, Lubelskie, Lubuskie, Małopolskie, Podkarpackie, warmińsko-Mazurskie, Zachodniopomorskie
<b>Yiddish</b>	Jews (NM)	8-10	dispersed, mainly in Warszawa, Kraków, Silesia region

NM – national minority, EG – ethnic group, RG – regional group