

The Germans of Opole Silesia and the Reform of Regional and Local Government in Poland¹

Introduction

In 1998 Poland completed the arduous process of a thoroughgoing reform of its structures of regional and local government. The stimuli for such changes were varied. They included the need further to confirm the break between communist and post-communist Poland, enhancing the democratic content of society, providing for a more rational and accountable system of local and regional government, and rendering such structures 'compatible with European Union (EU) norms'.

To the student of Polish affairs, that the nature of the reforms was hotly contested is no surprise. Although the party system is by no means nearly as fragmented as it was in the early 1990s, it must be remembered that the two main parliamentary blocs, the Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS), and the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), are as is indicated by their nomenclatures, in reality coalitions of a host of smaller groupings. Within the SLD there is a clearly dominant social democratic faction, among the dozen or so groups which are contained beneath the SLD umbrella. It is much more difficult to identify a similar counterpart within the AWS, within which around thirty amorphous factions may be found. The internal weakness of the AWS in part helps explain why the process of reform was as difficult as it was. In the event the proposal of the AWS and its coalition partners in the liberal Freedom Union (UW), to establish eleven or twelve voivodeships or provinces, in place of the forty-nine inherited from the communist era were defeated. In effect the government, weakened as it was by internal dissension, was forced to agree to the SLD's demand that sixteen voivodeships be established, and that the Opole voivodeship be saved from submersion within a single Upper Silesian voivodeship.

¹ The author would like to thank Andrzej Dybczynski for explaining the intricacies of Polish electoral law to him.

One of the biggest problem faced by the AWS was that decentralisation has been alien to the Polish political experience since the partitions of the late eighteenth century. Heavily influenced by French theories of statecraft and the Napoleonic model of state organisation, Poland has ever since its reconstitution in 1918, been characterised by centripetal tendencies. This drive toward centralisation was exacerbated by the fact that approximately one third of the population of the post-First World War state was not ethnically Polish, and many Polish citizens for example Germans and Ukrainians, were either unreconciled to their membership of the Polish state, whilst others, primarily Ukrainians and Belorussians regarded it as no more than the better of two evils: the other being the Soviet Union. Suffice it to say that the half-hearted attempts to provide political and cultural autonomy foundered due to the mutually exclusive demands of the titular and non-titular national groups.

The communist state which came into existence between 1944 continued with and re-enforced this pattern of centralisation. Despite various re-organisations of competencies and changes in the number of voivodeships, political power remained with the political centre. On the one hand the prevailing Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy demanded it, on the other historical memories dictated that it should be so. Today, surviving communist politicians freely admit that given the brutal way in which Poland lost its pre-war eastern territories and was shifted westwards at the expense of Germany and the indigenous German population, alternative forms of state structure existed only in theory.

As is well known, Poland led the way in the promotion of political change in East-Central Europe. By 1988 the communist party was firmly in retreat, and by the early 1990s it had all but disappeared. Since then post-communist governments have been driven by the objective of 're-joining Europe'. When stripped down to its essentials this means membership of Nato, which will be achieved this spring, and membership of the EU, which may be achieved in the early part of the next century.

As mentioned earlier, it is achievement of this latter goal that provided one of the stimuli for the re-organisation of regional and local government. Before examining this

process in some detail, it is worthwhile to pause and consider the extent to which Poland and other East-Central European applicants have been required to undertake structural reforms as a pre-condition for the commencement of negotiations on membership which began in March 1998. Poland has been required to introduce legislation which allows indigenous ethnic minorities to preserve and strengthen their cultures, restructure its heavy industry, embrace privatisation to the fullest possible extent produce plans for the re-structuring of the agricultural sector, change its laws on property and land ownership, as well as reform its system of internal administration. Of course, some or indeed all of these goals may be virtuous in themselves. The point is that as far as this author is aware, previous 'late applicants' to the EU have not had similar pre-conditions imposed upon them, and that some current member-states do not meet the requirements that they themselves are asking of their would-be partners, particularly in the fields of regional and local government.

This point is important within the context of this paper. The fragile consensus which existed in Poland on the need to re-structure regional and local government was shattered when the government finally presented its proposals. Apart from rendering Polish practice to the much-vaunted European norms, so that the voivodeships could make better use of the EU's structural funds, the government sought to achieve a number of goals which were primarily domestic in orientation. At one level, the government saw the proposals as contributing to the growth of civil society (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 26 October 1998). In terms of more efficient policy-making and implementation it claimed that the creation of twelve voivodeships would aid in the process of recovery in economic black spots. The government also argued that the plans would also enable it to carry out strategic reform of the health and education sectors, the administration of which were to be devolved to the voivodeships, along with responsibility for the environment and transportation infrastructure. What was perhaps most novel about the whole package was the fact that for the first time in Polish history, the entire adult population was actually being allowed to elect politicians to bodies (voivodeships), which had long been comprised of delegates from the communal councils. Not only that, their powers had been heavily circumscribed, and in true Napoleonic fashion, real power lay with the voivode or

governor who was the appointee of Warsaw. Although the office of voivode has not been abolished, their powers have been much diminished.

Leaving the issue of Opole Silesia to one side for the present, in general debate centred around a number of issues. At the micro level there were claims that the division of labour between Warsaw, the voivodeships, county boroughs, counties, and communes was unclear. There was also a suspicion in some quarters that Warsaw was seeking to divest itself of powers in order to escape responsibility for difficult areas of policy-making, it was claimed that the creation of twelve voivodeships would aid in the process of recovery in economic black spots. The government also claimed that the plans would enable it to carry out strategic reforms to the health and education sectors, the administration of which was to be transferred to the voivodeships, along with responsibility for the environment and transportation infrastructure.

There were objections from the capitals of voivodeships scheduled for abolition that their status would be diminished as a result of demotion to county borough status. For example, in the northern city of Bydgoszcz opponents of the proposals, in alliance with the ubiquitous SLD, were able to ensure the continued survival of the voivodeship. Complaints were also voiced about the nature of the proposed boundaries, with demands being made, particularly in the north of the country, that economic and historical ties be taken into account.

The debate also centred on the rationale of the reform, and it was here that the fragility of the consensus within the AWS was exploited by its opponents. Although the AWS presents itself as being a mainstream Christian Democratic party, elements of it whilst being Catholic are intensely nationalistic and hostile to 'foreign forces'. According to the analysis pursued by AWS dissidents, the Peasants Party (PSL), and various small right-wing parties not represented in parliament, such plans for decentralisation were by their very nature dangerous. They represented not a chance for Poland to re-join Europe, but rather an attempt and opportunity on the part of Poland's enemies once again to destroy the fabric of the Polish nation and state. For such people at best the EU represents a desire to create a federal Europe of which Poland should steer well

clear. At worst, the EU represents a Masonic, atheist conspiracy and in addition is but the latest incarnation of the eternal German desire to subjugate the Polish people.

Similar attitudes are exhibited by both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary right in all European countries, and are not unique to Poland. What is worrying about the Polish example is that such attitudes are much more of the mainstream than in most other European states, and that sections of the clergy, through newspapers such as *Slowo* (The Word), and Radio Marjya have lent credence to such arguments.

However, we should not allow ourselves to become overly despondent. As we move into our case study it will become clear, that although such attitudes are fairly commonplace, the results of the regional and local elections show the Europhobes to be firmly in the minority. Our analysis will also demonstrate that such extreme ideas are not confined solely to ethnic Poles, but that the (political leadership) of Poland's German minority was also more than ready to exaggerate the costs of the original proposals. The paper will also highlight the fact that regardless of ethnic provenance and political affiliation there was widespread consensus in the Opole region that the specific character of the region required that the government revised its plans. Before we turn to our case study let us conclude our account of the fate of the government's proposals.

The defeat in parliament of the original proposals in June, prompted something of a crisis within the ranks of the governing coalition. Forty-one members of the AWS and eight from the UW voted with the opposition. Although most of this group of defectors did so out of concern about the fate of their regions, there was a hard-core of AWS members whose opposition was based around the premise that the government was in effect promoting the re-Germanisation of western Poland, and of Opole Silesia in particular. To its credit, the AWS then expelled the two most voluble purveyors of this view, a move which forced the resignation of a further six of such like-minded MPs (Frankfurter Rundschau, 8 June 1998).

With its proposals for twelve voivodeships now in tatters, the government attempted to cobble together a compromise solution. The result was that in July an amended bill was passed which provided for the introduction of fifteen voivodeships, 305 counties,

65 county boroughs or *powiaty*, 2,489 communes or *gminy*, giving a total of over 63,000 seats to be filled (Central Europe Online 4 January, 1999). However, President Kwasniewski correctly sensed that he could wring further concessions from the government, given that the necessary three-fifths majority to override his presidential veto could not be found. So he vetoed the compromise and informed parliament that he would not lift it unless two additional voivodeships, one in the north-west and another in south central Poland were created. In the event, the government conceded the point on the southern (Kielce) voivodeship, and the legislation finally came into law. It was also claimed by both the president and the opposition that these opposition inspired amendments went a long way to satisfying the objections of people who did not want their regions swamped within over-large voivodeships.

The opposition presented itself simultaneously as the party of Europe, the party of reform, and the party which was most sensitive to regional needs. In its righteous anger against the government, the SLD managed successfully to dodge the issue of why it had failed to reform local and regional government when it had been in power during the course of the previous parliament. This seeming paradox to one side, SLD was extremely successful in exploiting the weakness of the governing coalition and of the AWS in particular.

Given the outcry which accompanied publication of the proposals, not least within the AWS itself, the whole process had become badly bogged-down. The elections which were originally scheduled to take place in June had to be postponed to October. Apart from the public protests and the SLD's ultimately successful campaign to force change upon the government, the PSL also got in on the act. In their attempt to present themselves as the defenders of 'traditional Polish values', they made it clear that their opposition to the government was fundamental in nature. Apart from calling for a referendum, they proposed that the existing structures be kept in place, although they did concede that the communes be given more power. The vote in the subsequent elections for the PSL-led Social Alliance showed, such populism may have managed to reverse the seepage of support away from the party (Salzburger Nachrichten, 13 July 1998).

At all three levels a variant of the party list system in multi-member wards was employed. Although in the larger communes single-member wards replaced multi-member wards. An unusual feature of the elections was that in communes of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, the panachage system was used, thereby enabling voters to select candidates from one or more lists. Things were somewhat simpler at the level of the *powiaty* and the voivodeships. Here voters could vote for candidates under an open party list system.

In general the consensus of opinion was one of relief. An obstacle to Poland's further integration with the EU had been overcome, and the most significant amendments to regional and local government since the re-foundation of the state in 1918 had also been achieved. Nowhere was this relief more keenly felt than in the voivodeship of Opole. Under the original plans it had been scheduled for extinction. Yet, thanks to a remarkable show of regional solidarity it had survived. The German minority in the voivodeship had played a crucial role in the campaign to prevent the area from being swallowed up in a giant Upper Silesian voivodeship. Before dealing with that campaign, it would be useful first to make some observations about the Germans of the Opole region; especially as before 1989 officially they did not even exist.

A Bitter Legacy

Upper Silesia is unique in contemporary Poland in that it contains a sizeable German population, although there is no consensus as to its number. Despite the ethnic cleansing of 1944-1949, the repatriation programmes between 1950 and 1990 when well over one million ethnic Germans left Poland (Marshall 1992:131) and easy access to a united Germany since 1990, it is claimed by German activists that as many as half a million Germans remain; primarily in the voivodeships of Opole Silesia and (Upper) Silesia, with the large majority of them residing in the Opole voivodeship (Kroll 1994). We shall now identify the characteristics of this group in order to better understand their concerns.

German Upper Silesians strongly identify with their *Heimat*. It has been argued that identification with *Heimat* is the single most important factor in this case. Attachment to place of birth, a belief in collective origin, a particular set of cultural orientations and customs all contribute to the creation of a sense of identification with *Heimat*.

German Upper Silesians were never fully accepted during the period of German rule as full members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Their Catholicism, Slavic origins, and dialects combined with a certain parochialism served to differentiate them from other members of the *Deutschtum* (those who adhere to German culture and way of life).

Today representatives of the German community are apt to point out that Silesia left the Polish orbit in 1335 and from 1526 under various guises remained part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and its Austrian successor, until the Prussians helped themselves to it in 1742. Whereas these statements are incontestably true, the implication that the people of the area have been German nationals since 1335 is not. Pre-modern empires, kingdoms, principalities, bishoprics and the like were not equivalent to nation-states. Neither did the rulers of such entities seek to create ethnically homogenous nations.

Even under the Prussians, Upper Silesia remained something of a backwater until the onset of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. Although the Prussian political elite sought to create a German nation in their own image, this was only achieved in an uneven fashion, and at the price of alienating key sections of society such as Catholics. With regard to the indigenous population of Upper Silesia, Prussian nation-building policies in effect were often counter-productive, and instead re-enforced identification with the *Heimat* and in fact served to bolster the cause of Polish nationalism which itself was Catholic, and wished to see Upper Silesians returned to their 'true' national group. Upper Silesia later came to be the touchstone of conflicting Polish and German ethno-territorial claims, which culminated in three Polish uprisings, the Second World War, and the ethnic cleansing of the period 1945-49. Indeed the Nazis had provoked further estrangement from Germany by categorising the majority of German-speaking Upper Silesians as Third Class Germans, precisely because they were deemed to be insufficiently Aryan. Poland therefore inherited a group of people

who spoke a mixture of German and German-West-Slavic dialects, and as such were distinct from the remainder of the German nation.

The German Minority in Poland from 1950 to 1990

We are now in a position to identify the provenance of the majority of Germans in today's Poland. As we have already made clear, they overwhelmingly stem from Upper Silesia, although there are also several thousand declared Germans resident in Lower Silesia and the former Prussian areas of Ermland and Masuria. Together with the Kashubes of Pomerania, indigenous Upper Silesians, Ermlanders and Mazurs formed a group of people whom the Germans claimed as German, and the Poles claimed as Polish. Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, in Upper Silesia, Kashubia, Masuria, and Ermland people who had been enrolled as Third Class Germans on the *Volkliste* were following a 'verification/rehabilitation procedure' eligible to be apply for (the return of) Polish nationality. Some opted for Germany, others for Poland, whilst others resolutely refused to opt for either, or even assumed multiple and sometimes transient identities. The complexities of the situation were at the time ill understood in either Poland or Germany, and are still not widely known today.

Consequently after 1945 other Poles regarded these people with suspicion. In Germany today, they are increasingly regarded as Poles who have taken advantage of Germany's generous definition of what constitutes an ethnic German in order to help themselves to the benefits of a life in Germany. Interestingly enough, this view is often shared in Poland, where it is not uncommon to hear those who emigrated during the 1980s and 1990s be described as *Volkswagendeutsch* (Volkswagen Germans or economic migrants), an obvious play on the word *Volksdeutsch* (ethnic Germans resident outside Germany).

Why then did the Polish nationalists seek to 'return' certain groups to the Polish nation? Clearly, in the industrial basin of Upper Silesia economic considerations played a part. However, it is more important to examine the doctrine of nationalism as employed by the incoming communist authorities. The communists were bereft of any deep-seated

legitimacy. Given that any material benefits resulting from socialist reconstruction would not be apparent for some years, it made sense for the new authorities to broaden the base of their support by incorporating the demand of the pre-war right for the creation of an ethnically pure state. After all, German and Soviet policies had already begun the task; the Polish communists now saw it as their mission to complete it.

The way in which this task was accomplished is of crucial importance in aiding our understanding of the contemporary situation. In theory, and in a curious parallel with wartime German policies, the task was first to identify the 'Germanised Slavs', separate them from 'ethnic Germans', who were largely to be expelled, and then to implement policies which would encourage greater identification with Poland. So much for theory. In reality the policy was badly implemented and probably was not capable of exact implementation in the first place.

We have already noted that these people resided in areas that were subjected to countervailing German and Polish nationalist pressures. For good measure, the Czechs had also claimed parts of Upper Silesia, along with the inhabitants. Nationality was not fixed to the degree it was elsewhere in Poland, and national identification was not necessarily coterminous with language. Indeed, many Upper Silesians lacked a working knowledge either of *Hochdeutsch* or standard Polish, and were fluent only in a variety of localised German-Polish creoles.

In the autumn of 1945, in the aftermath of war, with refugees, deportees, and the homeless and unemployed filling the streets, the 'Rehabilitation/Verification Commission' attempted to begin its work. The result was a disaster. Outsiders with little local knowledge, but possessed of a communist/nationalist agenda attempted to separate 'real' Germans from 'Germanised Slavs'. In practice, this involved trying to ascertain the ancestral provenance of those being verified, deciding whether a surname was indigenous or German, and whether or not an individual had a sufficiently pro-Polish attitude.

Anyone with a score to settle had a field day in denouncing his or her enemies. As usual figures vary, but in Upper Silesia, by the end of 1947 it is estimated that around

850,000 people had been 'positively rehabilitated/verified', in some cases against either their knowledge or will (Buchofer 1975:70). Those who stayed did so for a variety of reasons. In many cases people did not identify particularly closely with Germany, and were willing to give Poland a chance. Some believed that by becoming Polish they would be returned recently plundered and confiscated property. Others decided to sit it out in the belief that either the border would once again be pushed eastward or that communism in Poland would prove to be ephemeral. Their disappointment with the reality of the 'Rehabilitation/Verification process' and life in communist Poland more than anything else explains the existence of two inter-related phenomena of post-1945 Polish politics. The first of these phenomena is that of the *Spätaussiedler* (late [i.e. post-1970] re-settlers. The second is the German minority in contemporary Poland. What unites both groups is the fact that they are overwhelmingly drawn from those who were subjected to the 'Verification/Rehabilitation Procedure', and as such were the targets of (forced) re-Polonisation campaigns. Their existence as either *Volksdeutsch* in Poland or *Spätaussiedler* in Germany serves to indicate the extent to which both (forced) Polonisation and 'really existing socialism' failed to promote close identification with the Polish nation and state.

Germanness and German Identity in Upper Silesia

It is clear that since 1945 both individual and collective self-perception has undergone something of a change among large sections of Upper Silesian society. From among a group of people unsure of their relationship to large numbers now come to view themselves quite firmly as German. On occasion this even includes people whose parents thought of themselves as Polish, and who are descended from people who fought for the Polish cause during the Silesian uprisings at the end of World War One. This change in perception is in large measure a consequence of the chauvinism of the old communist party.

West Germany also played its part in cementing a German identity among large sections of Upper Silesian society. The old West German state actively sought to facilitate the emigration from former German territories and traditional areas of

German settlement, of those who under German law could be counted as ethnic Germans. The West German government was signalling that it felt itself morally responsible for the fate of these communities and regarded those who wished to declare for the Federal Republic as Germans first and (in this instance) Upper Silesians second and not the other way round. The activities of the *Landsmannschaften* and *Vertriebenenverbände* (Associations of Expellees and Refugees [from Eastern Europe]) must also be mentioned within this context. To this day they consistently lobby Berlin (and increasingly Warsaw) on behalf of Germans in Upper Silesia and elsewhere, and have over the years sought to maintain links between themselves and their compatriots in Poland.

Regardless of the interminable debates about numbers, a claimed total of 420,000 adults are currently affiliated to the *Verband der deutschen sozial-kulturellen Gesellschaften in Polen* (Association of German Social Cultural Societies in Poland, [(VdG)]. Of these almost 200,000 are to be found in the Opole *voivodeship*, and 75,000 in the (Upper) Silesian *voivodeship*. The rest of the membership is scattered throughout the country, with the next biggest concentrations to be found in Lower Silesia, Masuria and Ermland. There are other smaller German organisations throughout Poland, and some individuals remain unorganised. As we shall discover, whether or this claimed figure of 420,000 can be substantiated is an entirely different matter.

Only around one third of the claimed total membership actually pays its membership dues. This in turn raises a whole host of questions, such as why the initial rush of enthusiasm, and why the equally sudden waning of interest? Inevitably, answers to these questions are complex, and space does not permit of anything other than a cursory examination. In Poland the years 1989/1991 were a time of hope, especially for groups which had previously been marginalised. Given that the Germans of Upper Silesia did not officially exist until 1989, it is reasonable to assume that their hopes and expectations were possibly the greatest among any similar group in Poland. Unfortunately, their knowledge of geo-political realities and of Germany had been mediated by three equally unrepresentative sources: the communist media, *Landsmannschaft* activists, and contacts with relatives in Germany. Consequently

their expectations of what was possible were unrealistic, and the progress that has been made since 1989 is sometimes lost sight of.

Whatever the reasons for the decline in participation, there are in all probability fewer than 500,000 Germans in Poland, let alone the one million sometimes claimed by the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien*. Poles who could theoretically lay claim to adherence to the *Deutschtum* are not Germans by virtue of the fact they choose not to be. The same applies to those who designate themselves as Mazurs, Kashubes or Silesians, just as it does to people of mixed descent who have opted for a Polish identity. Neither are there any official figures available, as the national census omits questions concerned with nationality/ethnicity. Whatever the case, out of this definitional tangle it is normal for German academics to offer a figure for the community in the region of 500,000 (Bingen 1994). Polish academics tend to offer figures of between 350,000-400,000. For example, Dr Zbigniew Kurcz of the Department of Sociology at the University of Wrocław, estimates the number of Germans to be around 350,000 on the basis that only those who regularly participate in the affairs of the German societies in Poland possess a German consciousness and can be therefore counted as Germans.

Securing the Language and Culture

The response of the emerging leadership of the German community in Upper Silesia to the wider process of political change in Poland was to press forward with a series of political and cultural demands. As early as 1988 Johann Kroll and others attempted to register a *Deutscher Freundschaftskreis* (German Friendship Circle) with the courts (Kroll 1994). Although their initial attempt was unsuccessful, they met with positive results when in January 1990, such societies were registered in Katowice. With the bilateral German-Polish treaties of 1990 and 1991 any remaining legal obstacles to the registration of German cultural societies were removed. The objective of the societies in Upper Silesia as elsewhere was to secure the support of both governments for a series of activities which were designed to maintain the collective existence and cultural cohesion of the German community.

These societies operate in a majority of Poland's sixteen voivodeships. Their activities are co-ordinated by the VdG's ten-person national executive, which in turn is led by former senator Gerhard Bartodziej. Following legalisation they set themselves a number of tasks. At one level these centre on taking steps which are designed to preserve the German language. Community centres and libraries have been established and a range of ancillary organisations have come into existence.

The German language is disseminated through both the printed and broadcast media. There is a German-language press in Poland, and in the Opole and (Upper) Silesian *voivodeships*, there are now twice weekly radio broadcasts in German Radio broadcasts in German. In Opole, where the greatest number of Germans live, there is also a fortnightly German-language TV programme (*Schlesisches Wochenblatt*, 11 April 1997).

Another key objective has been that the practice of ensuring that the religious clergy of (Upper) Silesia is bilingual begun in the nineteenth century, and terminated by the Nazis be restored, and that religious services either be conducted partially in German where such demand exists. For decades the Catholic church in Poland and in particular the current primate Cardinal Glemp, sided with the government in its claim that whereas there may be 'autochthons' there were no Germans in Poland. The problem of liturgical language was particularly sensitive. German Upper Silesians are deeply religious, and the right to hold services either wholly or partially in their mother tongue was one of the original demands of the activists in the late 1980s. By 1991 and mainly thanks to the endeavours of Bishop Nossol of the Silesian diocese, and despite opposition from Cardinal Glemp, the situation had changed and such church services are once again a regular occurrence. In addition to masses in Polish, bilingual services are available in over 200 hundred parishes in Upper Silesia, and priests are once again required as far as possible to be bilingual (Kandzia 1995).

In the educational sector, two kinds of activities can be distinguished: the first concerns the provision of education for the German minority within the state schools system, and as such is seen to be of primary importance (Kroll 1994). In fact the importance of German education provision is probably the single most important item for the VdG.

They realise that if such provision is not increased the days of the German minority are numbered. There are constant complaints about the unwillingness of the authorities too increase such provision German understanding, and are not necessarily aimed at the German minority itself. The second comprises a series of cultural activities sponsored by the *Bund der Vertriebene* (Federation of Expellees [(BdV)], and the VdG which aims to inform both members of the minority and Poles of the cultural inheritance of formerly German areas of Poland.

Politically, the German community in Upper Silesia has sought to translate its numeric preponderance in the rural areas into political muscle. In 1990 the German minority entered the political arena. Its objective was to complement the work of the non-political associations and achieve national and local representation for the Germans of Upper Silesia and on behalf of the smaller German communities scattered around Poland. It met with immediate success in the October 1991 elections when seven of their candidates were returned to the *Sejm* (Lower House of Parliament) and one to the Senate. Given the multiplicity of parties which adorned this first post-communist *Sejm* the role of smaller parties was of importance in coalition formation and the maintenance of governments. However, the total vote for German minority candidates has fallen with each successive general election, as has the number of individuals paying subscriptions to the various *Deutsche Freundschaftskreise*. At the general election of 1997, voter participation was lowest in precisely those electoral districts where the number of ethnic Germans was highest. This in turn provoked a furious debate among German activists as to why this was the case. At the time of writing, a thorough review of organisational structures, objectives, activities and membership lists is being undertaken. Given the nationalist tendencies of the Polish right, the minority finds itself most comfortable with the liberal post-Solidarity Freedom Union (UW). Because of the narrow base of its constituency, i.e. the Germans of Upper Silesia, and the fact that the VdG operates as both political party and interest group, it defies straightforward classification (Sakson 1993: 3).

Prior to the general election of 1997, the VdG used both houses of parliament as a means of publicising its grievances and in reality confines itself to a rather parochial range of issues. Not only did the VdG lose its seat in the senate in these elections, it

lost two of its four seats in the *Sejm* (it had already lost three in the 1993 elections), and with them the privileges accorded to political parties. Its two remaining representatives Henryk Kroll and Helmut Pazidor, lobby various parliamentary institutions including the Parliamentary Committee for National and Ethnic Minorities (Kroll is actually a member of this committee), and the relevant sections of the Ministries of Interior and Culture on behalf of their constituents. Significant gains have been made in recent years, although the VdG claims that areas of discrimination still exist. It has been claimed that because (collective) minority rights which guarantee equality before the law to all ethnic minorities in Poland, have not yet fully been enshrined within Polish law, the various minorities do not necessarily receive equal treatment (Dialog Nos. 2/3 1995). Given that a draft Law on National Minorities was at last laid before parliament in the autumn of 1998, that issue may at last be nearer a resolution.

Opole Silesia and the Elections of 1998

We are now at last in a position to return to the issue of regional and local government reform which so excited the Germans of Upper Silesia during 1998. In the opinion of this author, the reaction of the political leadership of the German minority on occasion tended toward the hysterical. Given that Upper Silesia in general, and Opole Silesia in particular is ethnically mixed to an extent unknown elsewhere in Poland there were good reasons for maintaining the Opole voivodeship. However, a perusal of both the German press in Poland and that of *Landsmannschaft Schlesien* in Germany would indicate that as far as the Opole region was concerned, the objective of Warsaw was to destroy the political weight of the local German organisation the *Sozial-kulturelle Gesellschaft der deutschen* (SKGD) through the creation of a single Upper Silesian voivodeship. That some sections of Polish society wish this is beyond dispute. Our comments on the nature of the opposition to the reform package confirm this. However, the overall pattern of political representation in Poland confirms that such people constitute but a vociferous minority.

The attitude of the German activists toward the whole issue of regional and local government reform tends to lead to two conclusions. The first is that they perceive themselves to be the victims of over fifty years of oppression, and are incapable of making the intellectual and emotional transition away from communist to post-communist society. In a sense this is not too surprising. Between 1945 and 1956 in particular, those Germans who remained in Upper Silesia were subject to collective repression greater than that experienced by their more obviously Polish neighbours. Also, the bulk of the German minority is elderly and as such is indicative of that age group which is most resistant to change.

On the other hand, the SKGD leadership may have had other reasons for raising the stakes. We have already noted the extent to which the political representation of the German minority has fallen at national level since 1990. As a result of the failure of VdG candidates in 1997, the organisation was in desperate need of an issue which it could exploit in order to engender a sense of ethnic solidarity among the Germans of Opole Silesia. To this end, the plans for reform were presented as a threat to the very existence of the community. The fact that the SKGD and other branches of the VdG were well placed to take at least a share of power in a number of the new county councils was ignored. Instead all was staked on a campaign to save the Opole voivodeship.

As will become clear, the SKGD seems to have played an astute hand. Its strategy was not only to promote a sense of solidarity among Germans, but also build an 'Opole First' alliance with local Poles and Silesians. Thus throughout the summer and autumn of 1998 a series of events were held designed to make it clear that within the region as a whole, there was cross-community and major inter-party support for the retention of the voivodeship. In this they were helped by the church, led in Opole Silesia by the ubiquitous figure of Bishop Nossol, whose liberality on questions of ethnicity and Poland's relationship with the rest of Europe is somewhat at odds with many of his counterparts.

We have already noted that the campaign was successful, and the voivodeship was saved. In fact, it would not be out of place to say that the success of the campaign was

unprecedented. Not only was the voivodeship saved, but the area around the town of Kluczbork which contains a sizeable German population, was returned to the jurisdiction of voivodeship, having been transferred to the now defunct Czestochowa voivodeship in the mid 1970s. However, the VdG was thwarted in its desire to achieve the transfer of the town of Raciborz and territory adjacent to the city of Gliwice to the Opole voivodeship.

As for the nature of the campaign itself it embraced the usual gamut of activities commonly employed by pressure groups in Western Europe, and which indeed have been a constant feature of Polish life from at least the late 1970s. Resistance was co-ordinated by the Citizens Committee for the Defence of the Opole voivodeship (OKOOP). It must be stressed that OKOOP contained members from all sections of society and was supported by politicians from across the political spectrum, bar the nationalist right, and the occasional AWS and PSL dissident. Among other things it organised a demonstration in Warsaw as well as demonstrations in the voivodeship itself. It also organised a 2000,000 signature petition in favour of retention of the voivodeship, which itself was quite spectacular given the small size of the voivodeship, and most spectacularly in early June 1998, organised a 10,000 plus human 'chain of hope' around the boundaries of the voivodeship.

So, the SKGD in co-operation with OKOOP simultaneously managed to present itself as the defender of both the Germans of Opole Silesia and of the region as a whole. At the inter-communal level, the socio-economic differences between the mixed agro-industrial economy of Opole Silesia and the rest of Upper Silesia were stressed. Implicit within this was the claim that should the government get its way, Opole Silesia would have to subsidise the whole of Upper Silesia,.

When it came to the interests of ethnic Germans, the SKGD stressed that in a single Upper Siesian voivodeship, the German component would be reduced to little more than five per cent of the overall population, and that the Germans would be swamped both economically and culturally. After all in a joint Upper Silesian *Sejmik* the SKGD would have been lucky to secure more than three mandates (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 12 March 1998). Improbably, Kroll also claimed that the government's

proposals violated both Poland's international commitments regarding the treatment of indigenous minorities. He also claimed with a certain degree of greater plausibility that the proposals violated Article Sixteen of the Polish constitution, which forbids any territorial re-organisation of the state which fails to take into account existing social, economic, and cultural conditions.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the overall domestic climate was propitious toward the success of the campaign. First, we have already seen how the SLD was prepared to exploit the wider issue of reform in order to boost its own popularity, and expose internal divisions within the AWS. Secondly, it is reasonable to suppose that given the poor showing of the SKGD in recent elections, there was little reason to suppose that they would in fact be the main beneficiaries in the event that the voivodeship came to be saved (*Badische Zeitung*, 8 June 1998). In the event, when it came to Opole, the SLD made a massive miscalculation.

The SKGD's strategy seems to have paid dividends, in that following the elections to the *Sejmik* they have emerged as the second strongest party in the voivodeship with thirteen seats, just one behind the fourteen of the SLD (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 23 October 1998). In the coalition talks that followed, a coalition was formed by the AWS, UW and the German minority (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 14 October 1998). In other words the main rationale behind the coalition was to keep the 'communists' out of power.

Success at the *Sejmik* election was also repeated at the level of the *powiaty* and *gminy*. The VdG has representation in a total of forty-one of the seventy-one *gminy* mainly in the south and east of the voivodeship, and controls the *powiaty* of Kedzierzyn-Kozle, Krapkowice and Strzelce Opolskie. In addition, it has representation on four of the remaining nine *powiaty* councils, including, for the first time ever, two seats on the Opole city council (*Schlesisches Wochenblatt*, 13 November 1998). However, there were also setbacks. In the (Upper) Silesian voivodeship each branch of the VdG was left to make its own decision on whether it contested the elections on their own, or in alliance with a 'Polish' party. That most ran candidates on a variety of 'Polish' lists is encouraging. What was less encouraging for the VdG is that regardless of on which list they stood, German candidates did poorly. Although there will be German

representation in cities such as Katowice and Gliwice, nowhere in this *voivodeship* does the VdG come near to controlling any *powiaty*.

The leadership of the VdG has pronounced itself to be happy with the results in Opole Silesia (Schlesisches Wochenblatt, 16 October 1998), and on the surface they have every right to be, especially after their poor showing at the previous two general elections. However, the voting returns indicate that the VdG has greatly exaggerated the number of Germans in that voivodeship and probably elsewhere in Poland. The VdG achieved twenty-one per cent of the vote in the Opole voivodeship, which has an overall population of somewhat over 600,000. We therefore can crudely estimate that around 120,000 of the total electorate is German. To that number we need to add young people of under eighteen, and take into account that not every declared German feels obliged to vote for the VdG. Additionally, the SKGD claims it was successful in gaining votes from ethnic Poles who voted according to their pockets and not their hearts (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 26 October 1998). Whichever way the figures are viewed it is clear that claims of there being as many as 500,000 Germans in Poland are in fact difficult to substantiate, and the estimates of the scholars such as Kurcz are probably much closer to the truth.

As for the overall pattern of results, both space and the overall remit of this paper preclude any systematic or exhaustive analysis. A glance at the Appendix will also indicate that given the differentiated pattern of voting between the three tiers of regional and local government, any detailed analysis is best left to the experts once more comprehensive data becomes available. We can however make some tentative judgements. The first is that the system of panacharge used at the level of the *gminy* had the desired effect of encouraging voters to vote for local non-party lists. Second, it is clear from the returns that the UW has lost support since the general election of 1997. Third, we may tentatively conclude from the results to the voivodeship elections that the AWS and SLD have consolidated their position as the two dominant blocs within the party system. Finally, and with regard to the right, although it is once again difficult to make hard and fast predictions, it appears that around ten per cent of the electorate is immediately available to any party or movement able to consolidate the disparate groups which currently compete for this section of the electorate.

Conclusion and Outlook: The Future of the German Minority in Poland

For decades, the position and existence of the Germans in Upper Silesia and other parts of Poland dogged bilateral relations between Warsaw and Bonn. The two sides eventually established formal diplomatic relations in 1970, with one of the fruits of this tentative rapprochement being that over 550,000 people claiming adherence to the *Deutschtum* were allowed to leave Poland between 1970 and 1988. The changed political climate in Poland from 1988 resulted in official recognition by the government that Poland did in fact possess a German minority. However we also need to note that the fall of communism prompted a further exodus of designated Germans from Poland to Germany, and that this exodus coupled with the changed political climate in Poland prompted a re-think in Bonn of policy toward (the future of) this minority.

The economic boom in Poland appears to have brought an end to the wave of migration. Despite the uncertainty over exact numbers, the German community appears now to be the largest ethnic minority in Poland, and certainly is the best-organised (Sakson 1993:7). However, this does not mean that the political leadership among the German community is necessarily happy with either the attitude of or level of support it receives from Berlin and claim they receive insufficient financial and material support from the federal government. For its part the federal government sees itself as a facilitator of aid and rarely involves itself in issues that it considers to be solely within the competence of the Polish state. It has also made it crystal clear to the nationalist fringe which inevitably inhabits various of the German societies, that any activities which might lead to disturbance in Polish-German relations, or within Polish society will not be tolerated (Kroll 1994). Indeed, after the elections Kroll may himself be viewed as having upset the overall Polish-German relationship by issuing a call for *Spätaussiedler* to return home (Stuttgarter Zeitung, 13 October 1998). The only possible motive he had for such a statement apart from ostensibly to attract potential investors, would have been to increase the German population of the region.

Despite the progress of the past few years, the hubris of distrust still lingers. For example, one encounters complaints that the German minority does not enjoy the same privileges as the Ukrainian and other minorities in Poland. This is a claim which both the Polish and German governments refute, and have jointly stated that in their opinion the treaty of 1991 conforms to the United Nations' Charter on Human Rights, the Closing Act of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement, the Paris Charter for a New Europe of 1990 and the Copenhagen Document on the Human Dimension of 1990.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the 'Grand Design' of the VdG was to develop (Upper) Silesia as a bridge between Poland and Germany on the one hand and Western Europe and Eastern Europe on the other (Sakson 1993: 19-20). Although bilateral co-operation has improved out of all recognition, there is no sign that Silesia is about to become some kind of 'Super-Euroregion'. The success of such grandiose schemes is of course contingent upon Polish admission into the EU and a continued strengthening of the EU's regional policy. Given the ambiguities of the situation, current constitutional provision do not fully entrench Poland's assent to the obligations it has assumed through membership of such organisations as the Council of Europe, German (Upper Silesian) anxieties are understandable, if at times exaggerated.

What then are the implications of all of this upon Poland's desire to join the EU? At one level Poland now has a system of regional and local government which corresponds with EU norms. This in turn begs the question of which norms such structures in countries such as the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Sweden and Greece correspond to, but that is another story. The nationalist right showed that it was voluble, but the election results once again demonstrated that it is in a minority, and a fractured and ageing one at that. Whether or not these reforms will actually enhance Poland's claims for admission is less clear. It is self-evident that the task of achieving expansion, reform of internal structures and the structural funds more or less simultaneously is immense. Added to this is the fact that all new members are supposed to commit themselves to achieving the pre-conditions necessary to becoming part of the Euro zone. Whether or not all of these objectives can be achieved in the next ten years or so is highly debatable. The danger in such ambitious plans lies in the fact that if Poland is rebuffed, or is requested to meet admission criteria which it feels

to be discriminatory then the nationalist right will make a great deal of political capital, precisely because their opponents will be shown to have been false prophets.

As for Opole Silesia itself, the SKGD is in a comfortable position. There is no reason to assume that in the near future a further and probably final exodus of Germans will take place. In fact in the past few years there has been a modest inward flow of migrants returning to the area from Germany. Talk of establishing Opole Silesia as some kind of Polish South Tyrol has all but ceased. However, because of the political cleavages which exist within the Polish population of Opole Silesia, the SKGD can in fact act as king maker for the foreseeable future. Whether or not it will do so depends upon factors regional, national and international.

It is important to acknowledge that gains have been made in the past few years. The German minority now has its own voice in both national and local politics in Poland. Its existence is no longer denied by the Polish state, and both the Polish and German governments have sponsored a range of initiatives aimed at preserving the distinct nature of this society. It must be noted that there is tendency on the part of the VdG and its affiliates to look to Bonn rather than Warsaw in this respect, and to lobby Berlin through the *Landsmannschaften* (Liedtke 1994). Given the latter's pre-occupation with the property rights of expellees and refugees, this is a situation that neither government is altogether happy with. However, this has not led to real disruption to either inter-state relations or inter-communal relations which at present are good.

The greatest change has perhaps been in the matter of citizenship and ethnicity. What we have witnessed in Poland since 1945 is the creation of a German community in Upper Silesia which is more certain of its identity. This has come about not because of the success of German nation building strategies, but because of the failure of Polish equivalents. Stalinist methods were bound to be employed in the post-war years. Because of that experience, it is pointless to talk about 'missed opportunities'. The failure of communist authoritarianism shows that you cannot force foist upon people an identity which they reject. What has been encouraging is that since 1989 the

presence of a declared and substantial German minority has not proven to be the major political issue in Poland that some feared it might have become.

The incorporation of the Germans and their peak organisations into the new Polish political culture demonstrates that there is increasing acceptance that Poland as a state is host to a number of national minorities. Both sides have made concessions. The greatest of these concessions has been to recognise that not every citizen of a state has ipso facto to possess the nationality of the titular nation. Citizenship thus becomes detached from nationality, and acknowledgement of German nationality does not debar someone from membership of Polish society. Given the terrible legacy of German-Polish relations in this century, the continued toleration and flourishing of a German minority in Poland is the best indication we have of the strength of Polish liberal democracy.

Appendix

Results of the Polish Communal Elections: October 1998

| Party | Total Number of Seats | Share of Vote |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS) | 7,141 | 13.57 |
| Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) | 5,686 | 10.81 |
| Social Alliance | 3,153 | 5.99 |
| Freedom Union (UW) | 699 | 1.33 |
| Homeland | 206 | 0.39 |
| Polish Family | 136 | 0.26 |
| Citizens' Committees | 35,599 | 67.65 |
| Totals | 63,765 | 100.00 |

Results of the Polish County Council Elections: October 1998

| Party | Total Number of Seats | Share of Vote |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS) | 3,130 | 30.42 |
| Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) | 2,825 | 27.45 |
| Social Alliance | 1,341 | 13.02 |
| Freedom Union (UW) | 371 | 3.61 |
| Homeland | 48 | 0.47 |
| Polish Family | 14 | 0.14 |
| Citizens' Committees | 2,561 | 24.89 |
| Totals | 10,290 | 100.00 |

Results of the Polish Voivodeship Elections: October 1998

| Party | Total Number of Seats | Share of Vote |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Solidarity Electoral Alliance (AWS) | 342 | 40.00 |
| Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) | 329 | 38.48 |
| Social Alliance | 89 | 10.41 |
| Freedom Union (UW) | 76 | 8.89 |
| Homeland Patriotic Movement | 2 | 0.24 |
| Polish Family | 1 | 0.11 |
| Citizens' Committees | 16 | 1.87 |
| Totals | 855 | 100.00 |

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