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UPPER SILESIA AND UPPER SILESIANS – AN INTRODUCTION TO AN UNKNOWN REGION AND IDENTITY OF POLAND

1 Introduction

In April 2023, the Central Statistical Office (*Główny Urząd Statystyczny*) published part of the results of the 2021 national census concerning the ethnic identification of the citizens of the Republic of Poland and the language used by them in households. According to the data, 596,224 people declared Silesian ethnicity. Among them, 187,372 declared only Silesian ethnicity, and 385,046 people self-declared both Polish and Silesian ethnicities, among them 236,588 as first Silesian and second Polish.[1] The Silesian language use in household contacts was given by 467,145 respondents, including 54,957 as the sole language. In both cases, the vast majority of declarations concentrate on two voivodeships in southern Poland, covering most of historical Upper Silesia – today's Silesian and Opole Voivodships.[2] The number of ethnic Silesians fell in comparison to the 2011 census,[3] which may at least in part be due to

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[1] There were two questions on the census form regarding respondents' nationality: 1. what is your nationality? 2. do you also feel you belong to a second nation or ethnic community?

[2] In the Opole Voivodeship 60,049 people declared Silesian nationality and 84616 declared the language, in the Silesian Voivodeship 517,100 and 376,369 respectively (Source:https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechne/nsp-2021/nsp-2021-wyniki-ostateczne/tablice-z-ostatecznymi-danymi-w-zakresie-przynaleznosci-narodowo-etnicznej-jezyka-uzywanego-w-domu-oraz-przynaleznosci-do-wyznania-religijnego,10,1.html, accessed: 05 October 2023).

[3] In the 2011 national census, a total of 846700 people declared Silesian nationality, including 375,600 as the only nationality, 435,800 as the first nationality, and Polish 430,800. The Silesian language as used in household contacts was declared by 529,400 people, including 126,500 as the only language (Source: https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-

different methods. Still, Silesians have invariably remained the largest, albeit unrecognised, minority in Poland since the question of ethnicity was included in the census in 2002 for the first time after the Second World War.[4]

Since 1996, there have been unsuccessful efforts to register an association of persons declaring Silesian nationality, initiated by activists of the Silesian Autonomy Movement (*Ruch Autonomii Śląska – RAŚ*). The latter formulated a political agenda other Upper Silesian organisations also took up. The demands articulated by Silesian circles can be reduced to two strategic goals: territorial autonomy for Upper Silesia within the Republic of Poland and cultural autonomy for Silesians. RAŚ tries to separate these two issues, in the case of the first concept referring in its argumentation to the ideas of civic engagement, efficient management of resources, and rational organisation of the state while avoiding ethnic issues. However, the two demands are interrelated if only by the fact that the same circles articulate them.

Implementing territorial autonomy faces two principal obstacles: the territorial division of the state, introduced by the Act of 24 July 1998,[5] and the legislative monopoly of the central authorities, resulting from Article 95, point 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997.[6] „Historic" Upper Silesia, or rather the Mnemo-region constructed by the Upper Silesian elite in the 1990s,[7] is now divided

powszechne/nsp-2011/nsp-2011-wyniki/struktura-narodowo-etniczna-jezykowa-i-wyznaniowa-ludnosci-polski-nsp-2011,22,1.html, accessed: 05 October 2023).

[4] In the 2002 census, respondents had to choose one national identification. Silesian nationality was declared by 173200 people (Source: https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechne/narodowe-spisy-powszechne/narodowy-spis-powszechny-2002/, accessed: 05 October 2023).

[5] Ustawa z dnia 24 lipca 1998 r.

[6] „Legislative power in the Republic of Poland shall be exercised by the Sejm and the Senate" (*The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997*, https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/kon1.htm).

[7] The concept of Mnemo-region is used by Anne Rigney, who defines it as „virtual, de-territorialised mnemonic formations that are coterminous neither with national frameworks nor with the planet as a whole. As the idea of „region" indicates, these formations are bounded, although the location of that boundary is not defined a

between two voivodships – the Silesian and Opole. Both of them also include lands not belonging to the territory envisaged by the autonomists. In the case of the former, where the political activity of Upper Silesian organisations concentrates, that is about half of the area inhabited by about a third of the population. The administrative division, which the RAŚ contests, results from heated debates at the end of the previous century. The government's original project envisaged dividing the state into 12 voivodeships instead of the then-existing 49, including one covering all of the Upper Silesian lands. Due to the resistance of part of the political establishment, social organisations and local communities, the number of new administrative units was finally set at 16. Due to this increase, the formerly existing Opole Voivodeship, which has a considerable German minority concentrated in the eastern and central parts of the province, was also maintained.[8]

Introducing cultural autonomy for Upper Silesians is technically a much easier task. It requires an amendment to the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language of January 2005.[9] This legal act defines a national minority as „a group of Polish citizens who fulfil the following conditions: 1) is numerically smaller than the rest of the population of the Republic of Poland; 2) significantly differs from the remaining citizens in its language, culture or tradition; 3) strives to preserve its language, culture or tradition; 4) is aware of its own historical, national community, and is oriented towards its expression and protection; 5) its ancestors have been living on the present territory of the Republic of Poland for at least 100 years; 6) feels part of a nation living in different nation-state". Another legal definition introduced in Polish legislation is that of an ethnic minority, for which the first five conditions must be met, while the sixth is formulated as follows: „6) [a group] does not identify itself with a nation organised in its own state".

According to the current Polish legislation, Silesians can apply for ethnic minority status, which would guarantee them a number of

priori but is continuously emerging as one of the outcomes of communication and connectivity itself" (Rigney 2022, 168).

[8] Ustawa z dnia 24 lipca 1998 r., *op. cit*.

[9] Ustawa z dnia 6 stycznia 2005 r.

rights according to Article 18, which in point 1 states: „Public authorities shall be obliged to take appropriate measures in order to support the activity aimed at protection, maintenance and development of the cultural identity of the minority". For this to happen, they would have to be added to the catalogue of ethnic minorities in Article 2, point 4 of the Act.

The Act also includes the concept of a „regional language" defined as a language which is „(1) traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of the State, who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and (2) different from the official language of that State; it shall not include either dialects of the official language of the State or the languages of migrants". The only regional language included in the Act so far is Kashubian.[10]

Upper Silesian organisations and parliamentarians who support their goals have already taken numerous legislative initiatives to recognise Silesians as an ethnic minority or Silesian as a regional language, so far without success.[11] When submitting this article, Poland is in the midst of a campaign before the parliamentary elections, ordered for 15 October 2023. It is an opportunity to reflect on the possibility of implementing the demands that make up the Upper Silesian political agenda. The following parts of the article will present the genesis of the Upper Silesian identity and regional emancipation aspirations, with particular emphasis on the period after the collapse of the socialist system, followed by an attempt to diagnose the current condition of the Upper Silesian movement and a prognosis for the realisation of its strategic goals.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] In the passing parliamentary term, motions were tabled for both the recognition of Silesian as a regional language and Silesians as an ethnic minority (Poloczek 2023).

2 The sources of Upper Silesian Emancipation Aspirations

The concept of the „two Silesias": Lower and Upper, named after their location in the lower and higher course of the Oder River, dates back to the late Middle Ages.[12] However, the political division of the land had already taken place earlier – at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. At that time, the sons of Duke Władysław split the land between them, giving rise to two branches of the Silesian Piast line.[13] One was connected with Wrocław and Legnica in the northwest, the other with Opole and Racibórz in the southeast. Both adopted their coats of arms – a black eagle in a golden field and a golden eagle in a blue field, respectively – which, over time, came to be identified with the territories they ruled, subject to successive divisions into smaller principalities. Upper Silesia entered the modern era as a territorially established land – albeit divided between the Prussian Hohenzollerns and the Austrian Habsburgs since the Silesian Wars of the mid-18th century – with its own distinct name and emblems, but without a population identifying themselves as Upper Silesians. Indeed, its elites identified themselves with Silesia as a whole, equipped with its institutions and privileges, and with the individual principalities.

The emergence of a new group identity accompanied the rapid modernisation processes of the 19th century. After the Napoleonic Wars, most of Silesia was fully integrated administratively into the Kingdom of Prussia. The Silesian Province, with its capital in Breslau (today Wrocław), was established, being divided into smaller units called *Regierungsbezirke*. One of these, with its capital in Oppeln (today Opole), was identified with Upper Silesia. However, the lands of the former Lower Silesian principalities were also included, and the southern part of what had been called Upper Silesia in the premodern era, remained under Habsburg rule.[14] Therefore, Upper Silesia was

12 Greiner 1998, 11–13.

13 Žáček 2015, 140–143; Bahlcke 2015, 30–35.

14 Gawrecká 2015, 228–232.

reconstructed in a new territorial shape, defined by the boundaries of the *Regierungsbezirk Oppeln*.

Above all, however, the Upper Silesians were made. As Brendan Karch argues, a decisive role in this was played by the Roman Catholic Church, which, around the middle of the 19th century, managed to overcome the crisis caused by the expansion of Enlightenment ideas.[15] It succeeded in building the first durable social network, covering the entire area of the district, inhabited overwhelmingly by Catholics and isolated from other lands of the monarchy with a similar denominational character. Numerous Catholic associations, a burgeoning pilgrimage movement and a Catholic press ensured the social cohesion of a confessionally based community including Slavophones, Germanophones and bilingual individuals. The efficient mobilisation against secularising tendencies, which culminated in the *Kulturkampf* policy, was expressed in the successes of political Catholicism, represented by the *Deutsche Zentrumspartei*.

Upper Silesian party activists opposed both German and Polish nationalism, but it was not their intention to create a national Upper Silesian alternative to them.[16] Their loyalty to the church and the state was more essential to them than their „national rights"., which inhibited the development of lasting national loyalties among Upper Silesian Catholics.[17] However, in the early 20th century, the Polish national camp achieved its first electoral success here, soon to threaten the Deutsche Zentrumspartei's hegemony. Before the outbreak of the Great War, however, its momentum began to wane.[18]

The defeat of the Central Powers and the collapse of the European political order in 1918 opened the way for territorial claims for the newly formed Polish nation-state. Under Article 88 of the Treaty of Versailles, the fate of Upper Silesia, attractive as one of the largest industrial districts in Europe, was to be decided by a plebiscite. The

15 Karch 2018, 37–45.

16 Bjork 2008.

17 Kapitza 1917.

18 Bjork 2008, op. cit., 128–131, 156–157.

voters could have opted for Germany or Poland; the option did not contain independence, supported by the Union of Upper Silesians (*Związek Górnoślązaków / Bund der Oberschlesier*) and a considerable part of the population.[19]

The independentists had, however, some success. Both competing states, Germany and Poland, offered Upper Silesia a limited self-determination. Berlin established a separate Upper Silesian Province in 1919, while Warsaw passed a law on the autonomy of the future Polish Silesian Voivodeship, with its own parliament and treasury. These political solutions were implemented after the plebiscite of 1921, in which the German side received about 60% and the Polish side about 40% of the votes, which led to the division of the territory between the two states. However, autonomy did not last long. The autonomy of the Polish Silesian Voivodeship was limited after the seizure of power of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski's political camp in 1926, while the German Upper Silesian Province was abolished by the Nazi authorities in 1938. It was, however, re-established three years later on a territory enlarged with parts of the occupied Polish lands – both Silesian ones and neighbouring parts of Lesser Poland.[20]

The Nazi administration classified the inhabitants of these areas according to the criterion of their attitude to Germanness. After 1945, this *Deutsche Volksliste* (DVL) became the basis of the nationality policy also for the Polish authorities, first the coalition ones, then later the communist ones as well. The vast majority of the inhabitants of the interwar Silesian Voivodeship were subjected to rehabilitation procedures, but those assigned to the two highest DVL groups, were expelled, and partly sent to concentration camps by the postwar Polish authorities.

For the population of Upper Silesia, which belonged to Germany in the interwar period, a verification process was carried out. Retaining property and the right to remain in the region were conditional on

[19] Doose 1987, 110–149.

[20] Masnyk 2015, 290–317; Wanatowicz 2015, 318–346.

a declaration of loyalty to the Polish nation and state.[21] Polish historian Piotr Madajczyk emphasises:

> *„The policy towards the border communities was clearly defined at the end of the war: 1. First there was to be their segregation, i.e. the separation of people of the German option and their deportation from Poland. The Polish activists in Silesia, more than the politicians in Warsaw, were aware that mistakes were inevitable during the segregation, and that it would not be possible to accurately separate people of the Polish, German, Silesian and nationally indifferent options. These errors were to be eliminated in the long-term assimilation process. […] 2. Poles and ethnically non-affiliated people were to remain in Poland […]. 3. a consistent policy of Polonisation/repolonisation of ethnically non-affiliated people was to be pursued: a. negative – taking the form of removing all remnants of German culture and combating the use of the German language; b. positive – on the basis of repolonisation courses, learning Polish language and familiarising with Polish culture and tradition, inclusion in Polish organisations and activation in the Polish environment*".[22]

Regardless of the effectiveness of this policy, the Polish People's Republic was declared an ethnically homogeneous state. According to official enunciations, Upper Silesia, left in several waves of migration by many autochthonous inhabitants and welcoming settlers from other regions of Poland and areas lost to the USSR, was proclaimed to have a similarly monoethnic character for the next decades.

3 Upper Silesian Emancipation Aspirations since 1989

The situation changed radically with the political transformation in 1989. The myth of an ethnically homogeneous Poland and Upper Silesia collapsed with the recognition of the German minority and the

[21] Kaczmarek 2015, 353–357; Dziurok, Linek 2015, 373–379.

[22] Madajczyk 2014, 200–201.

registration of its associations. They succeeded in mobilising the autochthonous population, mainly in the part of the region that first came under the Polish administration in 1945. This mobilisation reached its apogee in the 1991 parliamentary elections when the German minority committee won seven seats in the Sejm and one senatorial seat.[23]

In the eastern part of Silesia, the German minority was noticeably less popular, while the Upper Silesian Union (*Związek Górnośląski*), established in 1989 by local elites linked to the Solidarity movement and supported by the local Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, gained significant influence.[24] Although the Union's ideological declaration emphasised the multi-ethnic character and the cultural diversity of the region, in practice, the association made explicit reference to Polish traditions – the pro-Polish Silesian Uprisings of 1919-1921 and its leading figure of Wojciech Korfanty (1873-1939).

Korfanty, a native of Upper Silesia, became the leader of the Polish national movement in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. After the Great War, he led the Polish plebiscite campaign. In 1921, he declared himself the dictator of the so-called Third Silesian Uprising, which was to force the European powers to divide the plebiscite area in favour of Poland. In the Second Polish Republic (1918-1939), as a leader of Christian Democracy, he opposed Marshal Piłsudski and his camp and defended the autonomy of the Silesian Voivodship, challenged by the government in Warsaw. After being imprisoned and forced into exile, he returned to Poland on the eve of the Second World War, where he was detained. He died soon after being released due to his deteriorating health, leading to suspicions of poisoning.[25] He, as the most notable and known historical figure from Upper Silesia, can be described in various ways: a hero of the Polish national movement, a defender of the autonomy threatened by Warsaw, or a leader of

[23] In 1993, the result was significantly weaker, with the German minority bringing only three MPs into the Sejm and defending a seat in the Senate. Since 1997, its parliamentary representation has been limited to two MPs and, since 2007, to one (*Wahlkomitee Deutsche Minderheit* https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahlkomitee_Deutsche_Minderheit).

[24] Myśliwiec 2014, 101–104.

[25] Lewandowski 2015, 182–185.

the Polish cause against the will of the majority of Upper Silesians expressed in the plebiscite of 1921.

The Upper Silesian Union did not adopt the formula of a political party – it did not run in the elections – yet it supported candidates of parties emerging from the „Solidarity" movement. It also gained influence in local authorities in the 1990s and recommended the first non-communist Voivode of Katowice. Up to a certain point, at a crucial time of reforms and the working out of the foundations of the new Polish democracy, it suggested discussions about the region.[26]

At this time, a much smaller role fell to the Silesian Autonomy Movement (*RAŚ*), founded in 1990 in Rybnik, a city in the south of the region. The association referred to interwar autonomy, which its activists believed should be restored as a natural consequence of overthrowing the communist order.[27] It also adopted a fundamentally different *modus operandi* from the Upper Silesian Union by fielding its candidates in parliamentary elections. With the 5% threshold being introduced nationwide, this activity was unfruitful, leading to the progressive marginalisation of the RAŚ. This trend was to be reversed in the late 1990s.[28]

Before this happened, regional elites, mainly those concentrated in the Upper Silesian Union, attempted a discursive reconstruction of the region, hoping that the concept they had developed would materialise due to favourable political decisions. The notion of reconstruction seems emphatically appropriate here – the authors of studies reflecting on the territorial shape of the region asked themselves: Does Upper Silesia still exist?[29] As research by sociologists has shown, there was undoubtedly a significant group of people declaring their ties to this region, the boundaries of which became the subject of lively debates among intellectuals. Wojciech Czech, the Voivode of Katowice in 1990-1994, played a crucial role in these discussions. An activist of the Upper

[26] Myśliwiec 2014, op. cit., 101–104.

[27] The autonomy of the Silesian Voivodeship was abolished by a decree of the communist State National Council on 6 May 1945.

[28] Myśliwiec 2014, op. cit., 106–110.

[29] Greiner 1998, op. cit.

Silesian Union, he coined the idea of the so-called Greater Upper Silesia, encompassing territories which had formed the region in different historical periods.[30]

Although this concept, conceived with an anticipated administrative reform in mind, was promoted by his association, it failed to meet with wider public acceptance.[31] It crashed against phantom boundaries, among which the inconspicuous Brynica River cutting through the Katowice agglomeration – a heavily industrialised area on both its banks – plays a unique role. From the late Middle Ages until 1806, it formed a section of the eastern border of the Holy Roman Empire. After the partition of Poland at the end of the 18th century, it separated Prussia from the Russian Empire, while in the interwar period, it was the border of the autonomous Silesian Voivodeship. Although it disappeared from the administrative map in 1941, it remained an essential element of spatial imagination and experience. Regional narratives combined it with ethnic auto- and hetero-stereotypes. They presented it as a border between West and East, civilisation and its absence.[32] The myth of the civilisational superiority of Upper Silesia as a region belonging to the Western cultural sphere also emerged in the face of its accession to the European Union, preceded by a referendum in 2003. The Upper Silesian Union, promoting the slogan „We were and are Europe", expressed the belief in the essentialist, „European" character of the region, implicitly in contrast to the not entirely „European" central and eastern Poland.[33]

After the administrative reform of 1998, the Brynica remained a purely phantom border. Not only did the regionalists' hopes remain unfulfilled for a merger of all lands perceived as Upper Silesian in a single voivodship, but also for a broad scope of self-government. The chances for autonomy, which had been discussed not only by the RAŚ but also by parts of the Upper Silesian Union, were dashed with the

30 Majcherkiewicz 2005, 275–278.

31 The outline of ‚Greater Upper Silesia' was included in the vignette of the association's magazine.

32 Daheur 2016, 155–172.

33 Tabaka 2003.

adoption of the new constitution in 1997. Nevertheless, establishing regional assemblies, elected by universal suffrage, represented a fundamental change. It established a stage for political activities that regional groupings could exploit. It fostered the growth of the RAŚ, which operated independently of nationwide parties and fielded its candidates in elections.

The second impulse that contributed to changing the hierarchy of Upper Silesian organisations was an attempt at the end of 1996, on the initiative of the RAŚ, to register the Union of People of Silesian Nationality. The applicants were successful in the court of first instance, but the voivode, who represents the government in the region, filed a successful appeal. The court ruled that the Silesians did not constitute a national minority, and therefore, registering the association under the proposed name and memorandum defining it as an ‚association of the Silesian national minority' would lead to the organisation acquiring unauthorised privileges.[34] The Supreme Court upheld this decision, and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg rejected the applicants' complaint. The procedural possibilities were exhausted with the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling in 2004.[35] Subsequent hearings attracted both regional and nationwide media attention. The autonomists gained an unprecedented opportunity to present their vision of Upper Silesia as a region and Upper Silesians as a community. In doing so, they appealed to values gaining importance in Poland, aspiring to membership in the European Union. They presented territorial autonomy no longer as a privilege to be restored in the name of historical justice and recognition of the uniqueness of Upper Silesia but as a right of every region and a decentralisation formula for a modern, well-organised state. In doing so, they referred to contemporary examples from Western Europe.

[34] Until 2005, there was no law on minorities in Poland. However, the electoral law exempted national minorities from the obligation to exceed the 5% threshold statewide in parlamentary elections. The ZLNŚ, if registered, could benefit from this privilege.

[35] Kwaśniewski 2004, 82–86.

Nationality, in turn, was defined in subjective terms, emphasising the importance of the individual's free choice.[36]

The association achieved wide publicity and attracted new activists. It also gained the support of several public figures, including the nationally known Upper Silesian film director Kazimierz Kutz, a member of the Polish Senate. Nevertheless, in the 2002 and 2006 elections to the Silesian Regional Assembly (*Sejmik*), the Autonomists did not manage to pass the 5% threshold in the Voivodeship, which was caused by the poor results in the non-Silesian part of the province. It was not until 2010 that RAŚ entered the Sejmik. Then it won three of the 48 seats and formed a coalition with the Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska, PO*) and the Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL*). The RAŚ representative in the executive was responsible, among other things, for cultural institutions, including museums.

It aroused particular controversy, which reached its apogee when the Silesian Museum – the largest in the region – announced guidelines for the scenario of a permanent exhibition on the history of Upper Silesia. It was to be the first exhibition of this kind in a museum in Poland. The guidelines, which broke with the traditional Polish master narrative about the region, were criticised not only by the then-opposition conservative-nationalist Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*) party but also by some politicians from the PO, including the President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski.[37] As a result, the museum director's contract was not renewed, which was the direct cause of the RAŚ leaving the coalition.[38] The association returned to a renewed coalition in the next term. Taking advantage of the political conjuncture in 2014, the RAŚ launched a civic, legislative initiative, collecting, together with other Upper Silesian organisations, more than 140,000 signatures for a proposal to add Silesians to the list of ethnic minorities in the 2005 law. The parliamentary majority – the PO and PSL coalition – however, held

[36] Myśliwiec 2014, *op. cit*., 106–110; Slenzok 2019, 249–268.

[37] Jodliński 2020, 49–69; Wądołowski 2020.

[38] Gorzelik 2013.

up the procedure until the end of the legislature. In the next legislature, the motion was rejected with the votes of PiS and Kukiz'15.[39]

Before the next regional elections in 2018, the RAŚ decided not to run under its banner, but together with the Upper Silesian Union, which had long been in crisis, as the Silesian Regional Party (*Śląska Partia Regionalna*). The aim was to attract new voters, including those outside the ethnic Silesian community, by emphasising the modernization of the region. Shortly before the elections, the Upper Silesian Union withdrew from the project, and the Silesian Regional Party faced competition from a second Silesian party, Silesians Together (*Ślonzoki Razem*), which had a stronger ethnic orientation. As a result, the votes of the Silesian electorate split, and neither party entered the regional assembly.[40]

The years 2010-2018 were, therefore, the time of the greatest successes of the Upper Silesian movement so far. Winning seats in the regional assembly by representatives of the regional movement, operating voluntarily and without subsidies, which in the Polish system can only be enjoyed by nationwide parties, was unique in Poland. Despite cooperation in the regional authorities with parties governing at the central level, none of the points of the Upper Silesian political agenda could have been fulfilled. RAŚ did, however, manage to offer a relatively coherent narrative – an alternative to the dominant one – that proved appealing to many in the region: the myth of industrialisation as a ‚golden age' and the Upper Silesian Tragedy as a myth of joint suffering play a crucial role.

The former has its impressive, material carrier in the monuments of industrial culture, networked to form the Industrial Monuments Route of the Silesian Voivodeship, established in 2006.[41] Its founders intended to integrate the heterogeneous voivodeship by emphasising the significance of industrialisation for all its parts.[42] However, this process

[39] *Sejmowe komisje za odrzuceniem projektu ustawy* 2016.

[40] Poloczek 2022.

[41] Official website of the route: https://www.zabytkitechniki.pl/.

[42] Hajduga, Staszewska 2012, 391–399.

took place differently in all of them due to varying political, social and cultural contexts. The RAŚ used these differences to emphasise Upper Silesia's distinctiveness and build an Upper Silesian heritage community.[43] The narrative offered a dynamic image of the region as a place of civilisational development rather than, as in Polish national discourse, an eternal persistence of Polishness against Germanisation. Exploiting the emancipatory potential of the industrialisation myth has been easy due to its absence from the Polish master narrative, in which the nobleman's manor house rather than the factory fulfils the function of *lieu de mémoire*.

The Upper Silesian Tragedy is a term used in autonomist discourse to refer to the repression of Upper Silesians in the final phase of the Second World War and immediately after its end. It encompasses both Soviet crimes – e.g. mass deportations to the USSR – and those committed under the auspices of the Polish authorities, at first coalition and then communist ones. This definition was included in the resolution of the regional assembly, adopted in 2011 on the initiative of RAŚ deputies, establishing the Upper Silesian Tragedy Remembrance Day. The place associated with the events of 1945, around which collective memory crystallises, is the gate remaining from the concentration camp in Zgoda (a district of the city of Świętochłowice). It is where the march organised annually by the RAŚ ends. A recurring theme in the speeches made on this occasion is the interpretation of the actions of the Polish communist security forces as ethnic cleansing. The symbiosis of communism being installed in Poland with radical Polish nationalism, exploiting the post-war trauma of society for brutal national unification, is also emphasised.

A third important element of the RAŚ narrative remains interwar autonomy, established to encourage Upper Silesians to vote for Poland in the plebiscite of 1921 and abolished in 1939 after the German invasion and formally repealed in May 1945. Every year in July, on the anniversary of the law's adoption by the Polish Sejm in 1920, the association

[43] The forum for presenting the RAŚ's views was the monthly magazine „Jaskółka Śląska" published by the association (Gołosz 2013, 1–3).

organises the Autonomy March in Katowice as an opportunity to remember this event, which was kept silent during the socialist period. The anniversary of the autonomy's abolition is also commemorated as a form of delegitimising the contemporary Polish state, which, according to autonomists, has failed to come to terms with its communist past by upholding the unlawful decision of 1945.

4 What next for Silesia?

The briefly outlined narrative on the region is the most enduring achievement of the Silesian movement, which has consistently built up the Upper Silesian community of memory over the last approximately 30 years. Participation in the administration of the Silesian Voivodeship also provided an opportunity to involve regional cultural institutions in the memory policy.[44] It also led to the creation of a regional studies programme at the University of Silesia in Katowice to prepare teachers to lecture on regional education. However, the limited competencies of regional and local authorities in shaping curricula affect these activities' efficiency. The Silesians achieving the status of an ethnic minority would be a breakthrough, opening the way to using the public education system to reproduce the Upper Silesian identity.

To use Aleida Assmann's term, the monumentalisation of memory in cultural works is an unquestionable success of Silesian circles.[45] Their discourse echoes in the works of Szczepan Twardoch, one of Poland's most popular contemporary authors, who publicly declares

[44] After the conservative-nationalist Law and Justice party took power in the province in 2018, the official politics of memory in the region intensified. It is an apparent reaction to attempts to undermine the hegemony of the traditional Polish master narrative. In the vaults of the Roman Catholic cathedral in Katowice, Church, state, regional and municipal authorities have jointly established the Upper Silesian Pantheon – an institution which, according to its statutes, is to promote the memory of figures of merit for the Polish cause in Upper Silesia. An Alley of Polish Heritage in Upper Silesia was also arranged in Katowice. Plaques with information relating to Polish traditions in the region were placed next to oak tree plantings. Both initiatives were received critically by part of the public.

[45] Assmann 2010, 80.

his Silesian nationality. Plays in the region's theatres are being staged in the unrecognised Silesian language and present the Upper Silesian narrative of the past.[46] Literature in Silesian is being produced, and canonical works of European literature are also being translated into Silesian. Despite these achievements, it cannot be denied that the dynamics of the Silesian movement have declined. It is suggested not only by the drop in Silesian self-declarations in the last census, partly explained by the changed methodology, but also by the significantly lower presence of Upper Silesian topics in the public debate compared to several years ago. Can we expect an impulse to reverse this trend in the near future?

The Association of Persons of Silesian Nationality (*Stowarzyszenie Osób Narodowości Śląskiej*, SONŚ) case, which is pending before the European Court of Human Rights, can fulfil such a function.[47] Unlike in the case of the Union of People of Silesian Nationality (*Związek Ludności Narodowości Śląskiej*, ZLNŚ) in the years 1996-2004, the Polish authorities cannot invoke the danger of unauthorised use of privileges provided for national minorities. Indeed, the statute of the SONŚ does not use the concept of a national or ethnic minority as defined in the 2005 Law on Minorities, but of nationality. It appears in Polish law only in the Census Act (Article 2, point 6), where it is explained as „a declarative (based on subjective feeling) individual characteristic of a person, expressing his/her emotional (emotional), cultural or genealogical (due to the origin of parents) connection with a particular nation or ethnic group".[48] The hearing before the ECHR in Strasbourg will likely attract public attention, and the Silesian movement may discount the applicants' possible success.

However, the possible registration of SONŚ will not directly affect the implementation of the Upper Silesian political agenda, as defined

[46] The play „Love in Königshütte" premiered at the Teatr Polski in Bielsko-Biała in 2012 and was particularly controversial. The play, written by Ingmar Villquist aka Jarosław Świerszcz, refers to the history of the concentration camp in Świętochłowice-Zgoda („*Miłość w Königshütte*" 2012).

[47] Myśliwiec 2014, *op. cit.*, 94–97.

[48] Ustawa z dnia 4 marca 2010 r.

at the beginning of this article. The prospects of achieving any of the strategic goals depend on the attitude of the legislature and, thus, on the results of the upcoming parliamentary elections, which will already be known when the article is published. The ongoing campaign has allowed the leaders of the nationwide oppositional parties to make declarations regarding the realisation of some of the Upper Silesian demands should the current opposition take power from the Law and Justice party. Both the liberal Civic Platform, the New Left (*Nowa Lewica*), and Third Way (*Trzecia Droga*), a coalition of the Polish People's Party and the Poland 2050 (*Polska 2050*) party, have expressed their support for legal protection of the Silesian language.[49] The leaders of the Civic Platform, which according to polls can count on the most significant support among the opposition groupings have included the recognition of Silesian as a regional language among its „one hundred concretes", pledging to fulfil the promise within the first hundred days of its eventual rule. However, there were also further-reaching declarations, with PO leader Donald Tusk, partly an ethnic Kashubian himself, publicly expressing his support for recognising Silesians as an ethnic minority.[50] For the first time, prominent politicians from major national parties had so clearly expressed their willingness to consider – either in part (regional language) or in whole (ethnic minority) – the Silesians' demand for cultural autonomy.

Regional autonomy, on the other hand, has not become a topic of the electoral campaign. Although the opposition stresses the need to strengthen local self-governments, accusing the current government of drastically limiting their financial possibilities and powers, a possible decentralisation of legislative powers is not discussed. Based on the declarations made during the campaign, it is likely that if the opposition wins, Silesian will be recognised as a regional language in the near future. On the one hand, this would be the first tangible evidence of the efficiency of the Silesian movement's activities. On the other hand, it could be regarded by the political establishment as a

[49] Poloczek 2023.

[50] *Donald Tusk jest „jednoznacznie" za uznaniem śląskiej mniejszości etnicznej?* 2022.

sufficient concession to the Silesians. It could close the way to adding them to the list of ethnic minorities for many years. Whether this will happen largely depends on the condition of the Silesian movement and its ability to exert political pressure.

Since their defeat in the 2018 regional elections, the Upper Silesian organisations have not overcome their divisions. However, they cooperated on a campaign to encourage people to declare Silesian nationality before the census. This discord is a bad omen before the regional elections, scheduled for spring 2024. The RAŚ has announced that it will put up its lists, withdrawing from the Silesian Regional Party project. However, there is a real danger that votes will again be split between the various Upper Silesian groupings. A prolonged absence of Silesian representation in the regional assembly would be a severe problem for the Silesian movement. The realisation of its demands requires both action to change the „common sense" of Polish society and the political elite, which is gradually producing results, and the ability to mobilise Silesians politically and exert pressure from below.

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