

A Model Minority

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What threatens the existence of the Sorbs, the smallest Slavic minority, and Europe's numerous other minorities? That was the question during the international conference held by Warsaw's Sorbian-studies community

The international conference "Sorbs and Other Language, Cultural and Ethnic Minorities in Europe" was held in Warsaw in March 2011. The organizers were the PAS Institute of Slavic Studies, the Institute of Western and Southern Slavic Studies at the University of Warsaw, the Warsaw Scientific Society, the Sorbian Institute in Bautzen, and the Institute of Sorbian Studies at the University of Leipzig.

It was the second conference devoted to the Sorbs organized by Warsaw's Sorbian-studies community together with Sorbian institutions. The first - "European Ethnic Minorities: Sorbs as a Model Minority" - was held in Warsaw in 2007. The conference papers were published in the annual journal *Zeszyty Łużyckie* (vols. 41 and 42).

The conference "Sorbs and Other Minorities" was an interdisciplinary event. It included researchers from Bautzen and Cottbus (capitals of Upper and Lower Lusatia, respectively), Leipzig, Zagreb, Prague, Lviv, Minsk, Berlin, and many scientific centers from across Poland. The conference included 13 thematic sessions, with papers presented by 52 people. The papers sparked lively discussions, with contributions from over 60 participants. Such high attendance was rather surprising, especially since the main subject of the proceedings was Europe's smallest Slavic minority.

The smallest minority

The Sorbs, also known as Lusatian Serbs, Lusatian Sorbs or Wends, live predominantly in the German portion of Lusatia, a region of German lands near the Polish and Czech border.

The Sorbs' situation is complicated since they do not form a homogenous minority. They include the Lower Sorbs, who live in Brandenburg near Cottbus and speak Lower Sorbian, and the Upper Sorbs, who live in Saxony with a capital in Bautzen and speak Upper Sorbian. Both

have the status of distinct languages (as recognized in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) with a long literary tradition dating back to the Reformation.

Today it is difficult to estimate the numbers of Sorbs. Sociolinguistic research has shown that the Upper Sorbian language is currently used by over ten thousand people, while Lower Sorbian is only used by a few thousand, mainly the elderly. Upper Sorbian is best preserved in the region inhabited by the Catholic population. Sorbian Protestants were assimilated far more rapidly, abandoning their forefathers' language.

A price for protection

The 19th century saw the birth of a Sorbian national movement aiming to revive the Sorbian culture. The first Sorbian institutions were established at the time, including the *Maćica Serbska* (1847) and *Domowina* (1912) organizations. The Sorbs' situation worsened following Hitler's ascent to power. Sorbian organizations were prohibited and disbanded, while the Sorbs themselves were persecuted and discriminated against. The Germans' defeat in Second World War, and in particular the formation of the German Democratic Republic, had a major impact on the Sorbs. They quickly became a "model minority" and were protected by the East German constitution. Several Sorbian cultural and educational institutions were established, although the Sorbs had to pay a price for the protection of their culture and language: they were required to give up their national interests to the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), and agree to the objectification and folklorization of their culture.



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Wiesław Mieszkowski

The conference was organized by Warsaw's Sorbian-studies community together with Sorbian institutions.

Photo: Profs. Madlena Norbergowa and Jadwiga Zieniukowa

A warm welcome

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany forced the Sorbs to start fighting for their cause. They were able to maintain their legal protection through the establishment of provisions to this effect in the constitutions of Saxony and Brandenburg, and obtained financing through the establishment of a Foundation for the Sorbian Nation in 1991 (with 50% of funding coming from the national budget, and 34% and 16% from the state governments of Saxony and Brandenburg, respectively).

In spite of seemingly encouraging legal conditions, the future of the Sorbs and the Sorbian languages remains under question. The extremely difficult economic situation in Lusatia means that many young people look for work outside of their native region. A demographic slump, progressive cultural and linguistic assimilation, and at times difficult German-Sorbian relations have led to a decrease in the numbers of Sorbs and users of the Sorbian languages. On the other hand, the recent years have brought new possibilities and activity ideas for the minority. The educational project Witaj [Welcome] and newly formed associations and cultural organizations have been attempting to encourage young Sorbs to participate in cultural life

and learn the language even in places where it stopped being handed down to younger generations decades ago.

Double threat

The conference touched on the problems of the languages of Sorbian and other European minorities (including Kashubian, Breton and Lemko), languages of national minorities (such as the Lithuanian minority in Poland), and ethnic, national and language minorities in Europe (for example the Basques, the Bukovina highlanders, the Old Believers, the Kashubs, Silesians, and Lemkos). In addition to the linguistics sections devoted to individual issues, the conference's proceedings and discussions focused on political solutions in countries whose territories are inhabited by autochthonic minorities, their histories and identities (in an anthropological, sociological and ethnographic sense), the literature and art of minority groups, and the role of scientific institutions in shaping their future. The conference demonstrated that the issues faced by minorities mirror the problems of society. Their existence faces a double threat: from the politics and interests of the nation whose territory they inhabit, and from progressive, voluntary, or enforced assimilation of their representatives. ■