

Political competitors of the German minority in local and parliamentary elections in the Opolskie province in the years 1990-2019

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Abstract:

The German minority has been successfully putting up candidates in local and parliamentary elections in the Opole province since the 1990s. It has its representatives at all levels of local government in the region, as well as in the Polish parliament. In subsequent elections held over a period of more than three decades in the Opolskie and Śląskie provinces, it has been competing for votes with political parties, regional or local committees, as well as committees referring to ethnic issues. The purpose of this paper is to indicate which of these committees are the major political rivals of German minority in the Opolskie province. In order to determine this, the aggregate election results of political groupings, local committees and committees addressing ethnic issues are analyzed and compared with the results of the German minority committee at the different levels of local government and in parliamentary elections. The conducted research is based on such methods as quantitative-qualitative analysis, case study, descriptive analysis, comparative analysis and desk research. In order to obtain a deeper insight into the topic under analysis and confront the information from various data sources and the literature on the subject with the opinions of German minority representatives active at different levels of the local government, the author has conducted in-depth interviews with a few of them.

Keywords:

German minority in Poland, political competitors of the German minority, democratisation, national and ethnic minorities in Poland

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Introduction

The German minority today – more than three decades after Poland's democratic breakthrough in 1989, and simultaneously more than three decades after the disclosure of its existence – has become a permanent and distinctive

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feature of the socio-political landscape of Opole Silesia. It is a regular and active participant in local and parliamentary elections, systematically introducing its representatives to bodies elected at all levels of local government, as well as to the Polish parliament. As researchers point out, this process gives the inhabitants of this cultural and national borderland the opportunity to preserve their ethnic or national identities (Lis, 2015, p. 123). Political scientists emphasise that the participation of Germans living in the Opolskie province in political competitions at both the central and local levels can be regarded as a model to be followed (Ganowicz, 2014, p. 145). They also observe that the German minority has become a significant political force in particular communes and districts of the province (Ganowicz, 2006a, p. 77), and at the provincial level it has been a co-governing force for many years, entering into various coalitions with political parties thanks to, among other things, its indeterminate ideological platform and the pursuit of pragmatic politics in local communities (Ganowicz, 2014, p. 201).

The issue of cultural, social and political activity of the German minority has been the subject of numerous studies and publications in the recent years. It has been dealt with by many researchers representing different fields: historians and political scientists (Browarek, 2015, 2018; Budyta-Budzyńska, 2003; Chałupczak & Browarek, 2000; Ganowicz, 2014; Lis, 1993, 2015; Madajczyk, 2001; Matelski, 1999; Mieczkowski, 2017; Rubisz, 2004; Urban, 1994), sociologists (Berlinska, 1989, 1999; Kurcz, 1995, 1997; Lemańczyk & Baranowski 2020; Nijakowski, 2005; Nijakowski & Łodziński, 2003; Sakson, 2014; Soldra-Gwiżdż, 2010; Śmiełowska, 1999; Szmeja, 2000, 2017), demographers (Rauziński, 1989, Szczygielski, 2006), lawyers (Grochalski, 2007; Sozański, 2002), as well as economists (e.g. Jończy & Łukaniszyn-Domaszewska, 2014). The German minority's political activity has been described in the context of lists and candidates put forward in parliamentary and local elections, their results, its presence on the national and provincial political scenes, co-governance of the region or presence in the Polish parliament. In their publications, researchers describe, analyse and compare particular electoral processes (Adamczyk, Sakson & Trosiak, 2015; Ganowicz, 2006, 2014; Lis, 2015; Łodziński, 2005; Mieczkowski, 2017). One of the recently major topics was the regional multiculturalism in the context of civil society activity and the quality of governance as exemplified by the Opolskie province with its German minority (Czepil & Opióła, 2020).

Methodology and purpose

The purpose of this paper is to indicate which election committees compete against the German minority for seats on local government councils. In

order to achieve this purpose, based on the extensive literature and quantitative data aggregated by the Central Statistical Office, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) or the National Electoral Office (NEO) in Opole, research methods such as quantitative-qualitative analysis, case study, descriptive analysis, comparative analysis and desk research were used. Within the framework of the research, the results of the German minority's election committees were analysed and compared with the results of their competitors. All committees were divided into three groups: committees representing political parties, committees established by local or regional interest groups and committees referring to ethnic issues in their electoral platforms. In the case of the third group of committees, the author relied on the declarative nature of their names indicating the sense of Silesianness of their candidates. The research also used the technique of Individual In-depth Interview (IDI). The interviews were conducted in order to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the researched issues and to confront the acquired information with that coming from the source data and the literature on the subject. A total of 15 interviews were conducted as part of the research in November and December 2020. The respondents included former and current members of the parliament representing the German minority; former and current chairpersons and members of the boards of its largest organisations in the Opolskie province; local government officials and German minority activists involved in the organisation and conduct of election campaigns.

The analysis of data for the purposes of the research was based on the results of parliamentary elections in the years 1991-2019, i.e. all elections that took place after the democratic breakthrough of 1989. In the case of local government elections, the time span under examination included elections held in the years 1998-2018, i.e. the period after the local government reform in Poland. In the case of local government elections at the level of the provincial assembly, the analysis covered the results of these elections from the entire region. As regards the levels of districts and communes, the conducted case study focused on election results in three districts and ten communes that, according to the 2002 and 2011 censuses, were inhabited by the largest German minority groups in the Opolskie province. These were the Opolski, Strzelecki and Krapkowicki districts, where over 18 percent of respondents declared German nationality in the 2002 census, and over 15 percent of respondents in the 2011 census. The aforementioned ten communes were the municipalities of Cisek, Zębowice, Biała, Strzelecзки, Kolonowskie, Lasowice Wielkie, Reńska Wieś, Walce, Murów and Prószków. According to the 2002 census, these communes were inhabited by at least 30% of people declaring themselves as German nationals; and according to the results of the 2011 census, not less than 20% of respondents declared their German nationality. This group

of local governments makes up more than 30% of all minority communes in the Opolskie province.

The analysed data were aggregated in the following way: the election results of the German minority (the number of votes cast for its lists) were compared with the total results (the combined number of votes) of all political parties that had taken part in particular elections, as well as the total results of all local committees putting forward their candidate lists in particular elections and the total results of all election committees whose names contained references to ethnic or national issues. The issue of election turnout was also taken into account. The division into political parties and local committees was made on the basis of NEC data on the types of committees registered for elections. Committees addressing national and ethnic issues were separated from the others on the basis of their names, which were regarded as a form of declaration. They were analysed separately as an additional category in order to verify to what extent the argument of identity could be relevant in the areas inhabited by German minority groups. Another reason was to provide an answer to the following specific questions: What is the significance of the role of the Silesian Autonomy Movement (a Silesian regional party), i.e. the most politically active organisation of Silesians in the Opolskie Province? To what extent is this movement a competitor for the German minority?

Support for the German minority in parliamentary and local elections in the years 1990-2019 – analysis of trends

The publications mentioned in the introduction, the ongoing observation of events on the political scene in the Opolskie Province, as well as the collected data leave no doubt that the support for the German minority in parliamentary elections, analysed on a regional scale over the course of almost three decades, i.e. the years 1991-2019, was declining. The number and percentage of votes cast for its candidates was consistently decreasing in subsequent elections. An exception, but only in terms of the number of votes cast for this minority, was the 2019 parliamentary elections. At the record high turnout in the entire region, the Germans admittedly received a higher number of votes (32,094) than in the parliamentary elections held in 2015 and 2011 (27,530 and 28,014 votes, respectively). However, support for them expressed in the percentage of all votes cast in 2019 was the lowest in the history of parliamentary elections held in the Opolskie province: it was just 7.9 percent (for comparison, it was 8.14 percent of votes cast for the German minority in the region in 2015 and 26.11 percent in 1990). Despite the higher number of votes cast for their representatives, the Germans failed to make

up for the losses in terms of the number of seats in the parliament. Since 2007, the German minority has been represented by just one Member of Parliament, while after the 1991 parliamentary elections it held seven seats in the Sejm and one seat in the Senate.

Tab. 1. Support for German minority candidates in the Opolskie province (OP) and for German minority committees throughout the country in parliamentary elections held in the years 1991-2019

	Year of election								
	1991	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019
Support for the German minority in the OP	74,251 votes 26.11%	60,770 votes 18.09%	51,027 votes 16.19%	42,340 votes 13.62%	34,469 votes 12.92%	32,462 votes 8.81%	28,014 votes 8.76%	27,530 votes 8.14%	32,094 votes 7.90%
Nationwide support for German minority committees	132,059* 138,167** votes	110,454 votes	79,963 votes	55,254 votes	40,050 votes	as above	as above	as above	as above
Number of MPs representing the German minority (nationwide)	7 MPs (including 3 MPs representing OP)	4 MPs (including 3 MPs representing OP)	2 MPs (representing only OP)	2 MPs (representing only OP)	2 MPs (representing only OP)	1 MP (representing only OP)	1 MP (representing only OP)	1 MP (representing only OP)	1 MP (representing only OP)

* Votes cast throughout the country for the German minority list [in the Częstochowski province (11,017), Opolskie province (74,251), Wrocławskie province (802), Szczecińskie province (835), Krośnieńskie and Przemyskie provinces (504), Nowosądeckie province (372), Katowickie province – city of Katowice (16,627), Katowickie province – City of Gliwice (27,307), and city of Warsaw (344)].

** Votes cast for German minority lists counted as above together with votes cast for the list of the German Minority “Reconciliation and Future” (6108).

Source: The author’s own work based on election results published in NEC Announcements and on the NEC website.

In the case of local government elections at various levels, it is possible to identify fluctuations in support for the German minority in the period under study. Data concerning the regional assembly and the districts and communes selected for analysis are shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4. The German minority’s electoral results indicate that even if one takes into account that in individual elections in a given area, the minority received more votes than four years earlier, the tendency was still decreasing over the period under examination. It is particularly visible when the number of seats won or the percentage support is taken into consideration. When it comes to elections to the assembly of the Opolskie province, in 2010 and 2018, the German minority committee did receive a higher number of votes than

in the respective previous elections, but the number of seats on the assembly was lower in both cases. The situation was similar in the districts. Even if the number of votes or the percentage of support increased in a specific election in one or all of the districts in comparison to the previous election, the number of seats won by Germans declined overall in all the districts of the region inhabited by the minority. If the 1998 election is taken into account, the percentage of support for the minority in the districts in the subsequent elections dropped in some cases by almost a half. It is worth noting, however, that in the majority of the districts where Germans put forward their candidates, their committees gain higher percentage support (sometimes even two or three times higher) in comparison with the percentage of people who declared their affiliation to the German minority in the 2002 or 2011 censuses.

Tab. 2. Support for the election committee of the German minority in the Opolskie province in the elections to the provincial assembly in the years 1998-2018

Election year	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Number of seats won	13 out of 45*	7 out of 30	7 out of 30	6 out of 30	7 out of 30	5 out of 30
Number of votes obtained	64,955**	54,385	49,131	53,670	41,889	52,431
% of votes obtained in the whole region	21.15%	18.61%	17.3%	17.77%	14.90%	14.64%

* In 1998 there were 45 councillors in the Opole Regional Assembly and since 2002 there have been 30 councillors.

** The number of votes in favour of the German minority cast for the lists of its committee in four out of the seven constituencies of the Opolskie province, on the basis of the data of the NEC, included in the publication *Wybory samorządowe 11 października 1998 r. Part 2: Wyniki głosowania i wyniki wyborów*. Vol. 8: Opolskie province, Warszawa 1998, p. 79.

Source: The author's own work based on the results of local government elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC; cf: Elections to commune councils: voting results and election results, Opolskie province, <http://wybory2002.pkw.gov.pl/grada/gw1/w16/index.html>, retrieved: 11.01.2019; Local government elections 2006, National Electoral Commission, <http://wybory2006.pkw.gov.pl/kbw/wynikiWbp2Tura.html>, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2010, National Electoral Commission, <http://wybory2010.pkw.gov.pl/geo/pl/000000.html>, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2014, National Electoral Commission, https://samorzad2014.pkw.gov.pl/357_rady_woj, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2018, National Electoral Commission, https://wybory2018.pkw.gov.pl/pl/geografia/160000#general_committee_stat, retrieved: 12.01.2019.

Tab. 3. Support for the German minority committee in the districts of the Opolskie province in the local government elections 1998-2018 (expressed by the number of seats won, the number of votes cast, and the percentage of votes obtained in the individual districts, compared to the percentage of people declaring German nationality in the 2002 and 2011 national general censuses

District	Elections						Censuses	
	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2002	2011
Opolski	29 out of 45	15 out of 25	16 out of 25	12 out of 25	14 out of 25	12 out of 23	19.81%	16.3%
	20,373 votes	17,461 votes	16,731 votes	14,276 votes	11,783 votes	15,871 votes		
	64.4%	51.38%	47.04%	37.34%	34.00%	37.10%		
Strzelecki	20 out of 35	13 out of 21	10 out of 19	9 out of 19	8 out of 19	9 out of 19	20.62%	15.9%
	9,631 votes	9,385 votes	8,758 votes	9,966 votes	6,666 votes	9,200 votes		
	67.1%	46.54%	44.01%	47.07%	34.23%	38.13%		
Krapkowicki	18 out of 30	11 out of 19	7 out of 19	7 out of 19	8 out of 19	7 out of 19	18.37%	15.3%
	9,894 votes	7,866 votes	5,793 votes	8,300 votes	6,428 votes	7,272 votes		
	60%	42.36%	33.81	40.21%	37.19%	33.59%		
Total districts of Opolskie province inhabited by German minority	114 seats 61,995 votes	61 seats (7 districts) 52,657 votes	54 seats (7 districts) 47,919 votes	49 seats (7 districts) 49,528 votes	45 seats (6 districts) 37,498 votes	45 seats (6 districts) 48,911 votes	9.80%	10.47%

Source: The author's own work based on the results of local government elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC; cf: Elections to commune councils: voting results and election results, Opolskie province, <http://wybory2002.pkw.gov.pl/grada/gw1/w16/index.html>, retrieved: 11.01.2019; Local government elections 2006, National Electoral Commission, <http://wybory2006.pkw.gov.pl/kbw/wynikiWbp2Tura.html>, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2010, National Electoral Commission, <http://wybory2010.pkw.gov.pl/geo/pl/000000.html>, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2014, National Electoral Commission, https://samorzad2014.pkw.gov.pl/357_rady_woj, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2018, National Electoral Commission, https://wybory2018.pkw.gov.pl/pl/geografia/160000#general_committee_stat, retrieved: 12.01.2019.

The most difficult task is to unambiguously assess the situation in the communes of Opole Silesia inhabited by large concentrations of the German minority. This is influenced by several variables. For example, a certain disadvantage is the relatively large number of constituencies where candidates, largely from the minority community, have no competitors in the race for seats on commune councils. The issue of non-competitive elections has recently been considered in

greater detail by M. Mazurkiewicz (2021). This means that there is no data from these constituencies on the number and percentage of obtained votes.

Tab. 4. Support for the German minority committee in the communes of the Opolskie province, in the local government elections held in the years 1998-2018 expressed by the number of seats won on the commune councils, compared to the percentage of people declaring German nationality in the 2002 and 2011 national general censuses

Commune	Elections						Censuses	
	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2002	2011
Cisek	11 out of 20	10 out of 15	9 out of 15	9 out of 15	10 out of 15	9 out of 15	42.4	30.9
Zębowice	13 out of 18	7 out of 15	9 out of 15	12 out of 15	14 out of 15	10 out of 15	42.1	28.3
Biała	18 out of 22	12 out of 15	9 out of 15	11 out of 15	6 out of 15	2 out of 15	42.0	32.2
Strzeleczyki	12 out of 20	9 out of 15	12 out of 15	7 out of 15	8 out of 15	6 out of 15	41.6	32.9
Kolonowskie	18 out of 20	12 out of 15	10 out of 15	10 out of 15	6 out of 15	4 out of 15	41.1	26.2
Lasowice Wielkie	14 out of 20	10 out of 15	8 out of 15	11 out of 15	9 out of 15	8 out of 15	37.4	29.5
Reńska Wieś	17 out of 20	10 out of 15	10 out of 15	7 out of 15	8 out of 15	13 out of 15	34.5	32.0
Walce	16 out of 18	9 out of 15	11 out of 15	14 out of 15	14 out of 15	13 out of 15	31.7	26.0
Murów	8 out of 18	8 out of 15	5 out of 15	8 out of 15	6 out of 15	3 out of 15	31.0	22.1
Prószków	14 out of 22	10 out of 15	14 out of 15	13 out of 15	13 out of 15	7 out of 15	30.2	26.2

Source: The author's own work based on the results of local government elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC; cf: Wybory samorządowe 11 października 1998 r. Part 2: Wyniki głosowania i wyniki wyborów. Vol. 8: Województwo opolskie, Warszawa 1998, pp. 19-52; Elections to commune councils: voting results and election results, Opolskie province, <http://wybory2002.pkw.gov.pl/grada/gw1/w16/index.html>, retrieved: 11.01.2019; Local government elections 2006, National Electoral Commission, <http://wybory2006.pkw.gov.pl/kbw/wynikiWbp2Tura.html>, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2010, National Electoral Commission, <http://wybory2010.pkw.gov.pl/geo/pl/000000.html>, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2014, National Electoral Commission, https://samorząd2014.pkw.gov.pl/357_rady_woj, retrieved: 12.01.2019; Local government elections 2018, National Electoral Commission, https://wybory2018.pkw.gov.pl/pl/geografia/160000#general_committee_stat, retrieved: 12.01.2019.

Another issue is that elections at the level of individual communes are to a considerable extent elections in which the voter knows the candidates running

for seats and casts their vote for a specific person, and not for a committee or party that this candidate represents. This is confirmed by the results of the survey conducted by the CBOS organisation and entitled “Voters’ decisions made in local government elections in 2018”. One of the conclusions of this survey is that in local elections, Poles prefer to vote for particular people rather than base their decisions on the recommendations of election committees, especially party committees (CBOS 2019).

On the basis of the analysis of the election results from the communities selected for the research, it can be concluded that there are areas where support for the German minority, measured by the number of seats won on commune councils, has remained at a constant, fairly high level since the 1990s, as is exemplified by the communes of Cisek, Zębowice, Lasowice Wielkie, Reńska Wieś and Walce. There are also municipalities where support translated into the number of such seats has almost systematically decreased over the past three decades. The cases in point are the communes of Biała or Kolonowskie (Kownacka, 2021, p. 438-450).

Political competitors of the German minority in the Opolskie province

The German minority has been an active participant in political life since the Senate supplementary elections of February 1990, which were held after the death of senator Edmund Jan Osmańczyk. One of the candidates was Heinrich Kroll (then still Henryk Król, later Henryk Kroll), later long-term chairman of the Socio-Cultural Association of Germans in Opole Silesia and an MP. He won the first round with 84,601 votes. In the second round, his support increased to 124,498 obtained votes. Eventually, however, Kroll lost to Dorota Simonides, who was later to sit on the Senate for many years. Ms Simonides obtained 258,135 votes cast by the region’s inhabitants. But even then, to the great surprise of the public and observers, the German minority showed that it could and would be a significant political force in the Opolskie province. As the sociologist Danuta Berlińska, who specialised for years in the subject of the German minority, wrote: “Silesian’s public manifestation of their identification with Germany in the years 1989 and 1990 was met with widespread incomprehension and a lack of acceptance of the possibility of recognising the existence of a German minority in Poland” (Berlińska, 1999, p. 199). Analysing the elections held in the years 1990-1994, Zbigniew Kurcz, on the other hand, concluded that the presence and scale of support for the German minority in those processes had triggered an unusually sharp political struggle with a nationalistic basis. This researcher aptly concluded that the subsequent elections covered by his analysis had not provoked an election campaign of such emotional intensity (Kurcz, 1995, p. 225), which is also true of all the other local government elections until the year 2019.

Competitors of the German minority in the elections to the Sejm, the provincial assembly and district councils

Table 5 shows that the voter turnout in the Opolskie province fluctuated in the period under analysis. The support for political parties putting up their lists of candidates also fluctuated during that time. In the great majority of the analysed cases, the falling turnout was accompanied by the falling number of votes cast for political parties' committees, which seems logical in view of the smaller number of voters who decided to go to the polls. An exception is the 2001 election, when, despite a decrease in the turnout compared to that of 1997, the number of votes cast for political parties in the region increased.

Tab. 5. Comparison of support for the German minority in the Opolskie province with support for political parties in the Opolskie province and turnout in the parliamentary elections held in the years 1991-2019

Election year	Number of votes for the German minority in the Opolskie province	Number of votes cast for all political parties in the Opolskie province	Turnout (%)
1991	74,251	181,447	41.71
1993	60,770	259,669	46.45
1997	51,027	249,800	42.19
2001	42,340	268,586	39.83
2005	34,469	232,355	33.47
2007	32,462	336,078	45.53
2011	28,014	291,652	40.95
2015	27,530	310,718	43.12
2019	32,094	374,345	52.91

Source: The author's own work based on the result of the elections held in the years 1991-2019, published by the NEC on its websites and in its publications.

The increase in the turnout correlated positively with the number of votes cast for political parties, but negatively with the number of votes supporting the German minority. This was the case in the local government elections held in the years 1993, 2007, 2015 and 2019. A systematic decline in the electoral support for the German minority is evident in the years 1991-2015. During this period it lost 46,721 votes (comparing the result of the elections held in 1991 and 2015), or two-thirds of the total number of votes it obtained in 1991. An increase in the number of votes cast in parliamentary elections in the Opolskie province for the German minority's candidates is only visible in the latest election held in the period under analysis, i.e. in 2019. The German minority improved its result by

more than 4,500 votes compared to the results achieved in 2015. It is worth noting at this point that in the 1991 and 1993 elections, the German minority was the force that received the greatest support for their lists of candidates in the Opolskie province. It was only in 1997 that more people in the region voted for AWS (76,720 votes) and SLD (66,961 votes); in 2001, the German minority was outrun by SLD (120,778 votes), and in 2005 by Civic Platform (64,683 votes) and Law and Justice (54,779 votes). Nevertheless, an analysis of the above data on a year-to-year basis does not indicate a simple correlation between the falling support for the German minority and an increase in the support for political parties or vice versa: between a fall in the number of votes cast for political parties and an increase in the number of votes obtained by the German minority. But the analysis of the results of the elections held in the years 1991-2019 shows a twofold decrease in the number of votes cast for the German minority and a simultaneous twofold rise in the number of votes received by election committees established by political parties.

Tab. 6. The support for the German minority, political parties, local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues, as well as the voter turnout in elections to the provincial assembly held in the Opolskie province in the years 1998-2018

Election year	Number of votes cast for the German minority	Number of votes cast for all political parties	Number of votes cast for all local committees	Number of votes cast for ethnic committees	Turnout (%)
1998	64,955	199,963	-	-	43.58
2002	54,385	212,568	21,828	3,514	40.61
2006	49,131	223,156	7,600	4,151	39.02
2010	53,670	245,732	2,674	-	40.99
2014	41,889	218,674	14,813	5,702	42.13
2018	52,431	271,720	30,010	4,034	45.36

Source: The author's own work based on the result of the elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC on its websites and in its publications.

The above summary (Table 6) shows that between 1998 and 2006, the voter turnout in local government elections was decreasing, and from 2010 to 2018 it was gradually increasing. The role of local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues in their electoral platforms was insignificant, even marginal, during the whole period. Such committees managed to obtain a larger number of votes only in 2018. A case in point was the committee of voters called Kukiz'15 (21,708 votes), which had the status of an election committee established

by a group of voters and not by a political party, although could be perceived as a political grouping because of its nationwide reach. In local government elections to the provincial assembly held in the years 1998-2006, the number of votes cast in support of political parties was rising, and simultaneously the number of votes cast for the committee of the German minority was falling. Subsequent electoral processes were characterised by parallel increases or decreases in the number of votes cast for the minority and political parties. As for committees referring to ethnic issues, in the period under analysis the Silesian Autonomy Movement put up its candidates in the Opolskie province in three elections held in 2002, 2006 and 2014, and the Election Committee of the Silesian Regional Party on only one occasion. Nevertheless, neither of them participated in the division of respective council seats, although they managed to obtain from 3500 to 5700 votes.

Tab. 7. The support for the German minority, political parties, local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues, as well as the voter turnout in elections to district councils held in the years 1998-2018 – Opolski district

Election year	Number of votes cast for the German minority	Number of votes cast for all political parties	Number of votes cast for all local committees	Number of votes cast for ethnic committees	Turnout (%)
1998	20,373	11,907	3,709	-	40.19
2002	17,461	10,739	5,782	-	35.27
2006	16,731	14,358	4,475	-	36.68
2010	14,276	15,588	6,358	2,014	38.96
2014	11,684	20,210	599	1,294	39.39
2018	15,871	21,095	5,808	-	41.93

Source: The author's own work based on the result of the elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC on its websites and in its publications.

The above table (Table 7) shows that in the years 1998-2014 the support for the German minority in the Opolski district was systematically decreasing. In the latest election, however, an increase in this support was recorded. It is worth noting that none of the committees established by political parties won more votes than the German minority committee in the entire period covered by the analysis. And in the particular elections held in the years 1998-2006, the German minority committee won even more votes than all party committees combined. This means that the German minority enjoys the greatest support in this district. One could also advance the thesis that a large part of this support is generated by diehard electorate that has not changed for many years. Since 2002, however, there has been a steady increase in the number of votes cast for the lists of candidates

put up by political parties intensifying their activity in the Opolski district. In the same period there was also an increase in the voter turnout. This leads to the conclusion that this increase is advantageous for the committees established by political parties. The support for local committees fluctuates. However, taking into account that these committees together receive from approximately less than 4000 to slightly more than 6000 votes, they can be considered to be an important player on the electoral stage (with the exception of the 2014 election). The Silesian Autonomy Movement put up its candidates in the district council elections held in 2010 and 2014, but its results were rather unspectacular.

Tab. 8. The support for the German minority, political parties, local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues, as well as the voter turnout in elections to district councils held in the years 1998-2018 – Strzelecki district

Election year	Number of votes cast for the German minority	Number of votes cast for all political parties	Number of votes cast for all local committees	Number of votes cast for ethnic committees	Turnout (%)
1998	9,631	5,027	1,437	-	39.43
2002	9,385	4,742	6,038	-	35.26
2006	8,758	3,014	7,454	674	34.40
2010	9,966	4,442	5,515	1,250	37.20
2014	7,087	11,169	687	496	38.41
2018	9,200	10,007	4,924	-	52.08

Source: The author's own work based on the result of the elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC on its websites and in its publications.

In the period covered by Table 8, despite fluctuations, the support for the German minority in the Strzelecki district remained at a relatively high and stable level. In the years 1998-2010, the number of votes cast for the German minority committee alone was each time higher than the number of votes cast for all party committees combined or for all local committees combined. Political party committees performed significantly better in the two recent elections (2014 and 2018), gaining more support than the German minority. As far as committees referring to ethnic issues are concerned, the Silesian Autonomy Movement put up its candidates in the district council elections held in the years 2006, 2010 and 2014. It obtained from approximately 500 to a little bit more than 1200 votes, which should be considered a noteworthy result, but one without any impact on the balance of power in the district.

Tab. 9. The support for the German minority, political parties, local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues, as well as the voter turnout in elections to district councils held in the years 1998-2018 – Krapkowicki district

Election year	Number of votes cast for the German minority	Number of votes cast for all political parties	Number of votes cast for all local committees	Number of votes cast for ethnic committees	Turnout (%)
1998	9,894	4,900	2,061	-	40.32
2002	7,866	4,435	6,270	-	37.19
2006	5,793	4,959	4,167	2,215	34.97
2010	8,300	10,461	1,880	-	41.67
2014	7,535	8,130	916	453	41.49
2018	7,272	2,078	12,301	-	no data

Source: The author's own work based on the result of the elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC on its websites and in its publications.

The above summary (Table 9) shows the variability in the voter turnout over the years. It was declining steadily until the 2006 election, and increased to just over 41 percent in subsequent elections. The support for the German minority ranged from less than 5800 votes to almost 9900 votes; for political parties – from just over 2000 votes in the latest election to almost 10500 votes in 2010; and for local committees – from less than 1000 votes in the 2014 election to over 12300 thousand in the latest election. It should also be noted that no party received more votes than the German minority. And in the juxtaposition of the German minority with local committees, there was only one case of a local committee winning more votes than the Germans. It happened in 2018 when the committee of voters supporting Maciej Sonik obtained 7901 votes, i.e. 500 votes more than the German minority. In the analysed period in the Krapkowicki district, committees referring to ethnic issues put up their candidates twice: in 2006 the committee called “The Future for Silesia” was supported by more than 2200 voters and in 2014 the Silesian Autonomy Movement received 453 votes. Neither of these two events constituted a serious threat to the position of the German minority in the district.

Competitors of the German minority in individual communes

An analysis similar to the one above was performed for the ten communes of the Opolskie province inhabited by the German minority. Table 10 presents the aggregated data used in the analysis.

Tab. 10. The support for the German minority, political parties, local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues, as well as the voter turnout in elections to commune councils held in the years 1998-2018

Commune	Election year	Number of votes for the German minority (number of seats won/including number of seats won without elections)	Number of votes cast for committees of political parties	Number of votes cast for local committees	Number of votes cast for ethnic committees	Voter turnout (%)
Cisek	1998	1,267 (11/3)	-	925	-	43.15
	2002	1,200 (10/0)	-	899	523	34.56
	2006	676 (9/5)	-	781	502	37.14
	2010	1,266 (9/1)	381	-	1,007	41.82
	2014	847 (10/2)	-	114	630	43,61
	2018	947 (9/1)	-	944	-	45.07
Biała	1998	1,937 (12/3)	-	440	-	42.83
	2002	2,129 (12/0)	130	1,817	-	37.73
	2006	1,644 (9/1)	729	1,385	-	38.09
	2010	867 (11/5)	380	942	-	31.79
	2014	1,174 (6/1)	128	1,901	-	39.96
	2018	1,007 (2/1)	182	2,658	-	47.81
Strzeleczki	1998	2,044 (12/1)	-	1,208	-	43.87
	2002	1,786 (9/0)	-	1,713	-	38.11
	2006	365 (12/9)	-	328	-	30.06
	2010	1,615 (7/1)	700	1,845	-	44.91
	2014	1,025 (8/1)	-	1,121	-	45.58
	2018	1,365 (6/0)	-	1,716	-	52.54
Zębowice	1998	1,695	-	281	-	38.48
	2002	1,597 (7/0)	75	1,551	-	37.03
	2006	2,060 (9/1)	-	1,618	-	39.04
	2010	1,302 (12/5)	159	555	-	36.95
	2014	86 (14/13)	88	-	-	40.84
	2018	778 (10/0)	-	675	-	49.58
Kolonowskie	1998	3,332	-	272	-	39.81
	2002	2,367 (12/0)	-	1,338	-	34.55
	2006	1,722 (10/0)	31	1,195	57	31.45
	2010	1,679 (10/0)	-	969	-	28.48
	2014	738 (6/0)	-	1,126	-	38.64
	2018	806 (4/0)	17	1,340	-	45.11

Commune	Election year	Number of votes for the German minority (number of seats won/including number of seats won without elections)	Number of votes cast for committees of political parties	Number of votes cast for local committees	Number of votes cast for ethnic committees	Voter turnout (%)
Reńska Wieś	1998	3,095 (17/1)	-	476	-	38.86
	2002	2,040 (10/2)	-	1,405	633	38.66
	2006	1,585 (10/3)	59	1,089	-	30.50
	2010	2,051 (8/0)	913	1,340	-	36.94
	2014	1,197 (8/1)	373	1,022	186	41.86
	2018	1,498 (13/1)	-	1,182	62	42.69
Lasowice Wielkie	1998	2,615 (14/0)	240	315	-	42.09
	2002	1,476 (10/2)	1025	348	-	33.11
	2006	913 (8/3)	241	1,110	-	36.29
	2010	1,693 (11/0)	816	843	-	39.12
	2014	654 (9/2)	503	633	-	36.46
	2018	779 (7/3)	240	715	-	41.31
Walce	1998	3,243 (16/2)	-	148	-	44.07
	2002	1,503 (9/3)	44	1,547	-	26.34
	2006	1,216 (11/7)	-	861	-	31.44
	2010	2,925 (14/1)	108	1,208	-	40.98
	2014	183 (14/3)	-	114	-	44.59
	2018	90 (13/13)	-	166	-	37.59
Murów	1998	1,190 (8/1)	531	366	-	38.65
	2002	1,161 (8/0)	672	1,707	-	37.63
	2006	912 (5/0)	-	2,348	-	38.49
	2010	1,541 (8/0)	1441	1,250	-	41.63
	2014	655 (6/0)	386	740	-	39.87
	2018	612 (3/0)	296	1,271	-	49.53
Prószków	1998	1,323 (14/6)	-	1,366	-	45.25
	2002	2,095 (10/1)	146	1,845	-	40.91
	2006	2,599 (14/4)	-	1,252	-	40.61
	2010	2,193 (13/5)	-	1,170	-	42.93
	2014	741 (13/8)	-	686	-	37.80
	2018	1,168 (7/2)	-	1,409	-	46.67

Source: The author's own work based on the result of the elections held in the years 1998-2018, published by the NEC on its websites and in its publications.

Each of the communes included in the above table has its own specificity. However, several general conclusions can be drawn. It should certainly

be recognised that political parties are not serious competitors for the German minority in elections held at the commune level. Political parties either do not put up any candidates in elections to commune councils or receive very low support. The communes of Zębówice, Kolonowskie, Walce and Prószków are cases in point. But there are also communes where an occasional participation of a political party's committee in an election resulted in a relatively large number of votes cast for it. Examples of such communes include Strzeleccki, Reńska Wieś, Murów, Lasowice Wielkie and Biała.

At the level of communes, the German minority's major competitors are local or regional election committees. They are usually committees active within the boundaries of a commune or sometimes committees addressing issues important for just one village. The number of local election committees was larger in the years 1998-2002 than in the subsequent period. For example, the commune of Strzeleccki had seven or eight committees putting up their candidates in elections held in that period. In Reńska Wieś, there were more than a dozen local committees competing for seats on the commune council in the 2002 local government election. In each of the analysed communes, local committees obtained significant numbers of votes and, consequently, participated in the division of seats on commune councils. It should be noted, however, that for a long time, i.e. in the local government elections held in the years 1998, 2002, 2006, and even 2010, the German minority usually attracted more votes than all the other local committees putting up their candidates lists in a given commune. In subsequent elections, this began to change: there were more and more votes cast in support of local committees at the expense of the support for the German minority. This trend was reflected in the election results in the communes of Biała, Strzeleccki, Zębówice, Kolonowskie and Reńska Wieś.

Also, the conducted analysis allows for disproving the thesis that the Silesian Autonomy Movement or other committees raising Silesian issues in their election platforms pose any real threat to the position of the German minority. Among the communes covered by the analysis there are those where the Silesian Autonomy Movement or any other "Silesian" committee have never competed for electoral support, for example the communes of Biała, Strzeleccki, Zębówice, Walce, Lasowice Wielkie, Murów and Prószków. In other communes, such as Kolonowskie, a "Silesian" committee participated in an election race only once, without obtaining good results. On the other hand, there are also communes where committees addressing ethnic issues put up their candidates more often and achieved better results. The cases in point are the communes of Cisek and Reńska Wieś. Nevertheless, in terms of political support, such ethnic committees were not

able to compete effectively with the German minority, based on the assumption that the voter looks for candidates for whom regional, ethnic or national issues are important.

Reflections of the German minority's leaders – in-depth interviews

The issue of political competitors of the German minority in parliamentary and local government elections was also the subject of in-depth interviews conducted by the author. The interviewees were asked the following questions:

- Do political parties “take away” voters from the German minority? If so, do they take away support mainly in parliamentary elections or also in local government elections?
- Which election committees have been the most serious competitors of the German minority in parliamentary and local government elections in recent years?
- Which of the main existing political parties of the last three decades is the German minority the closest to in terms of ideology and electoral programmes? Does this cause an outflow of votes?
- Do other committees referring to national issues (e.g. Silesian Autonomy Movement, Silesian Regional Party) deprive the German minority of support?

The participants of the interviews were granted anonymity, therefore, the statements below are quoted anonymously, with an allocated code. Answering the questions, all activists invited to participate in the research acknowledged that in their opinion political parties took voters away from the German minority, especially in parliamentary elections. One of the respondents said:

They definitely take them away in parliamentary elections, to a much lesser extent in local elections. It is simply a matter of identification. (...) You know people who are not brought in in briefcases. I'm leaving aside elections to the provincial assembly, because this is where politics begins. (...) This behaviour in assembly elections is starting to be similar to that in parliamentary elections (05/11/2020).

Another interviewee emphasised that the outflow of German minority supporters to political parties in parliamentary elections in recent years had been significant. In their opinion, in the 1990s there was no such outflow. Then, however, as the activist explained, voters supporting the German minority began to vote for larger parties whose programmes corresponded to their needs or worldview. As

they expressed it, this was a case of “supporting the likely winners” (06/11/2020). Another respondent explained:

From the point of view of the average citizen, representatives of the German minority have very little, if any, influence on decisions taken at the national level. Consequently, they identify parliamentary elections as party-dominated, ones that are supposed to give power to someone who will have similar views to them and be their representative. (...) So they choose precisely those parties that represent the values that German minority members identify with (13/12/2020).

Some interviewees argued that the reason for the dwindling support for the German minority committee in parliamentary elections was that political parties were still present in the media, which contributed to their promotion. “Their political arguments, their programmes are covered in the media on a daily basis. So it is absolutely natural that they take away our votes” (04/11/2020), said one interviewee. The activists also raised another important argument: the great diversity of views within the German minority community. As one of them put it, these views represented the whole spectrum “from left to right”. They added that the taking away of minority votes, also in local elections, “started with Tusk, who said that every vote that is not for the PO is for PiS” (07/11/2020). In a similar vein, another German minority activist said:

(...) we’ve been witnessing a polarisation of the political scene for a long time. We have two major parties and they, on either side, are also attracting our voters. And among our members, we have many liberals, open to Europe [...]. There is also a large number of conservative people, and they are drawn towards the right-wing party. This is of lesser importance in local government elections. Here, it is the individual that counts (...) (03/11/2020).

That respondent stressed that in the past, when the German minority was just being reborn, things had been different. Back then, as they said,

we used to stick together, and we were being driven by this togetherness. It was only when we were building a coalition that we tied ourselves to political parties. At the election stage there was a pull in our own direction. Especially, in view of the fact that we also had something to offer besides a national note. We were very pragmatic in our approach to issues. We talked about sewerage

and water supply systems thanks to money from the West. It was important, existential, non-partisan, but practical thinking (03/11/2020).

It is also worth quoting the reflection of another research participant, who recalled a publication by Thomas Urban from the mid-1990s (Urban, 1994):

Looking into the future and painting various scenarios, he then condemned the political project of the German minority to failure. He (Urban – author's note) argued that the stronger we integrated with the majority society, the more difficult it would be to maintain some kind of separateness. Because people's lives would be determined not by their own ethnica, but by the problems of the Poles living around them (04/11/2020).

When asked in the in-depth interviews which political forces constituted the most serious competition for them in the past years, the German minority activists mentioned many parties, which corresponds to the statement about a wide range of political views among members of the German minority. One of them said:

The PO first of all, before that it was the Freedom Union. And then the more right-wing ones, too. In their majority, our voters represent traditional behaviours in terms of religion, faith. They do not accept more liberal behaviours. In this sense, they are close to PiS, in the past to the PC, maybe less to the ZChN (06/11/2020).

Another interviewee said:

In the past five years PiS has probably taken the most voters from us. German minority members and Silesians say that nobody has given us as much as PiS, what with those 500 zlotys for children. Political bribery turned out to be effective. (...) And in terms of ideology and political programmes, we are close to the PO, now the Civic Coalition. This translates into a coalition in the provincial assembly and in the districts (12/11/2020).

The interviews also revealed that the directions of the outflow of voters away from the German minority had been changing over the years. Some respondents pointed out that there was no single grouping in the political mainstream of Poland that would manage to attract a considerable number of

German minority voters representing a very wide range of worldviews. Therefore, German minority members support different parties and groupings. This is how one activist explained the situation:

Members of the German minority in Opole Silesia are, on the one hand, conservative voters and, on the other hand, open and liberal voters. They go to church, but are also pro-European. There is no party that would respond positively to such attitudes. If conservatism predominates in a given voter, they will move fast towards PiS, the right wing. If another German minority voter supports the ideas of Europeaness and openness, they will tend to support the PO. A confirmation of such an image of German minority voters is the good result of Szymon Hołownia in the recent presidential election. Hołownia somewhat combines the qualities referred to above: conservatism, attachment to Christian values with Europeaness. (...) We also performed an analysis that showed that he had definitely won among our members (04/11/2020).

The same interviewee also referred to the electoral preferences of members of the German minority in the first years of its existence, saying:

In the first years after the breakthrough of 1989 and the disclosure of the existence of the German minority the situation was much simpler. Back then we were probably closer to AWS or the Freedom Union, which was a substitute for what the German minority could relate to. But at that time the most important thing was still the ethnia, that is one's own origin. It used to play a bigger role than it does today. But that was shortly after the breakthrough. The majority of voters were people who had strongly experienced the period of the prohibition on the use and teaching of German, discrimination on the basis of origin. They didn't have to think too much about which election committee to choose. Even if they did not like Kroll, they still voted for the German minority committee because they thought these were the key aspects, the most important ones (04/11/2020).

The interviewee also had no doubt that, in parliamentary elections, the main competition for the German minority were political parties, whereas in local government elections it was local committees. They explained:

Undeniably, when a committee appears at the level of a commune or a district, then it is a big problem for us, because it naturally draws on what we also refer to: freedom from any party affiliation. (...) Then it is the personal argument that

decides: the leader, who is at the forefront and whether they are stronger than someone from the opposing committee (04/11/2020).

Another respondent pointed out that the biggest competitor had been in some places local committees formed by former activists of the German minority.

When asked whether other election committees addressing ethnic or nationality issues, for example the Silesian Autonomy Movement or the Silesian Regional Party, attracted previous supporters of the German minority, the majority of the interviewees stated that these committees did not represent significant competition for the German minority. One of them explained that one of the reasons for this was that the Silesian Autonomy Movement had a model of functioning different from that of the German minority, which was focused on everyday, regular action in the field, among its members. "They don't have such structures. They thrive on controversy, that is existence or presence in the media. While in the large Śląskie province, their presence in the media was significant, they didn't manage to do so here" (04/11/2020), he said. Some of the interviewees also pointed out that although "Silesian movements" were not competition for the German minority to be afraid of, they did take away some of its votes. One respondent said:

If we look, for example, at the election held six years ago, we can see that the Silesian Autonomy Movement obtained a relatively low number of votes in local government elections. In some municipalities, however, this was important as it may have been the reason why the election committee of the German minority committee won one or two fewer seats on a commune council or, particularly, on a district council. In other words, they didn't win much of anything for themselves, but they deprived us of some votes and, consequently, our competitors succeeded in introducing a larger number of their representatives to commune or district councils (11/11/2020).

Conclusions

From the above analysis of the election results of the German minority compared with the election results of political parties, local committees and committees referring to ethnic issues, as well as from the confrontation of the findings of the analysis with the opinions of German minority leaders presented during in-depth interviews, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) there was a systematic decline in the support for the German minority in parliamentary elections throughout the period under analysis (with the exception of the election held in 2019). Until the mid-1990s, the minority was a force whose election committee received the most votes in the region; it was only in 1997 that the committees of the Electoral Action Solidarity (AWS) and the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) obtained more votes; in the subsequent years the election committees of the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS) also managed to outrun the German minority in the parliamentary electoral race,
- 2) in the entire period under analysis the number of votes cast for the German minority in parliamentary elections decreased more than twofold, while the number of votes cast for political parties almost doubled,
- 3) in the case of elections to the Opolskie province assembly, in the entire period covered by the analysis, seats on the assembly were won mainly by political parties and the German minority. The role of committees addressing ethnic issues in their electoral platforms was marginal, and the role of local committees was insignificant,
- 4) in the case of elections to (Opolski, Krapkowicki and Strzelecki) district councils, during the whole period from 1998 to 2018, the German minority election committee was the largest political force; almost until the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it obtained more votes than committees established by political parties or local activists. In the recent years, however, it is political parties that have been winning more votes in these districts than local committees,
- 5) the support for "Silesian" committees in the aforementioned districts was low, but in individual elections such a committee was able to take away a seat on a district council from the German minority or a political party,
- 6) in the case of communes, the conducted analysis shows that political parties and ethnic committees are no competitors for the German minority at this level; the strongest competition here comes from local committees (although until the end of the first decade of the 21st century it was the representatives of the German minority that usually attracted more votes in communes than local committees); in recent years it has been observed that there is an increase in the number of votes cast for local committees or a decrease in those cast in support of the German minority,
- 7) as for the most interesting conclusions drawn from the interviews: their participants indicated that political parties took voters away from the German minority, especially in parliamentary elections; according to the minority leaders, the primary reason for this is the diversity of views and opinions in the German

minority community or the permanent presence of political parties in the media; their own surveys show that in recent years, the majority of German minority members vote for either Law and Justice (due to worldview and social issues) or the Civic Platform/Civic Coalition (due to the pro-European orientation of the voters or their desire to vote against right-wing parties attacking the German minority).

In conclusion, it can be said that in both parliamentary elections and provincial assembly elections, political parties are the biggest competitors of the German minority. This may lead to the conclusion that at these levels, political and ideological arguments are more important for German minority members than regional or national issues. In local elections to commune bodies in the Opolskie province, the biggest competitors of the German minority are local committees, which have been obtaining more and more votes in recent years, while the support for the German minority has been declining. This may lead to the conclusion that the German minority banner (and possibly also the ethnic banner) is gradually losing its power of attraction. These findings correspond with the thesis of one researcher specialising in minority issues, who concluded that “the achievement of the called for rights and privileges, the improved economic status, and finally the obsolescence of the threat of assimilation by the Polish majority have caused the model of ethnic voting to lose its force” (Szczepański, 2013, p. 221), as well as the extensive argument presented by Paweł Popieliński, according to which, with regard to the German minority, an advanced process of integration of this minority into the majority society can be observed (Popieliński, 2020). However, an interesting situation takes place at the level of the districts covered by the analysis. In the selected districts, the German minority continues to be the committee achieving the greatest support in local government elections. However, support for parties has been growing in recent years, which may indicate that local government elections at this level are becoming increasingly politicised. “Silesian” election committees constitute no real threat to the electoral results of the German minority in the Opolskie province.

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