

The Decline of Minority Representation in an Illiberal Context: The German Community in Poland

Historical Background

The German minority in Poland is historically the largest recognized national minority in the country. Its origins date back several centuries, particularly in regions such as Silesia, Pomerania, and parts of Lesser Poland, where the community developed a well-established, thriving, and culturally vibrant presence. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, this community was characterized by relative economic prosperity, linguistic distinctiveness, and strong organizational networks, including educational and cultural institutions supported by the German state.

World War I and the subsequent redrawing of national borders following the Treaty of Versailles significantly changed the situation of the community. In the post-war period, Poland was reborn as an independent state (1918) and inherited areas with a significant German population. Despite its demographic diversity, the German community retained its distinct identity. However, the interwar period was characterized by intensified nationalization policies, tensions, and political mobilization.

After World War II, shifting borders and wartime atrocities dramatically changed the composition of the community. The Yalta Conference (1945) and subsequent agreements resulted in territorial adjustments, including the westward shift of Poland's eastern borders, which led to significant population movements. The majority of the German population was expelled or forcibly resettled across the new borders, mainly to Germany. It is estimated that during this period, nearly 3.3 million ethnic Germans were forcibly resettled from Poland, and numerous community institutions were abolished.

Despite all these, a German minority continued to exist in Poland, primarily in Silesia and the Opole region, where internal migration and historical presence had preserved a limited but active community. During the communist period (1945–1989), except for a brief period, the German minority was not recognized.

The fall of Polish state socialism and the subsequent democratization process in 1989 opened new opportunities. The Polish state recognized the community and provided constitutional guarantees for the exercise of its rights. German minority organizations were established and actively participated in political life. Since then, the community has consistently sought to represent its interests in the national parliament. Since 1990, the German minority had successfully maintained this parliamentary representation, which is a significant achievement given the demographic decline and changing political priorities.

However, recent trends – including population decline, changing voter preferences, and internal organizational conflicts – have jeopardized this status. By 2023, for the first time in more than three decades, the German minority lost its seat in parliament.

Methodology

The study took a multidisciplinary approach, combining a thorough review of academic literature, analysis of official census data, and election results. The primary goal was to understand the factors behind the recent loss of representation in the German parliament, with a particular focus on demographic, political, and organizational processes.

The most important analytical tools were as follows:

1. **Demographic analysis:** Population data from various censuses were examined to assess trends in the size and geographical distribution of the German minority. Attention was paid to population decline, geographical dispersion, and community concentration in certain regions, especially in the Opole Voivodeship.
2. **Election analysis:** Data from several parliamentary elections in recent decades were analyzed to track changes in the number of votes cast for German minority organizations and voter support. The declining vote share over time indicated a decline in political support.
3. **Voting behavior and mobilization index:** The study used the Strijbis–Kotnarowski mobilization index, which is a quantitative tool for measuring electoral participation relative to population size and voter turnout. Its application allowed for comparisons over time, revealing trends in voter turnout and community political activity.
4. **Organizational dynamics:** The study also examined internal issues within minority organizations, including leadership changes, generational divides, and the role of political alternatives. These internal dynamics influenced community cohesion and political success.
5. **Contextual analysis of the political environment in Poland:** The loss of parliamentary representation for the German community cannot be understood without understanding the broader political context: in 2023, particularly fierce electoral rivalry, record-high voter turnout, and strategic voting decisions by voters played a key role.

This comprehensive methodology enabled the researcher to triangulate data, identifying patterns and causal factors behind the community's decline in parliamentary representation.

Results and Findings

The central finding of the study is that the imminent loss of the German minority's parliamentary seats in Poland represents a significant change in the political situation of the community and marks the end of a unique era. Several interrelated factors have contributed to this development:

1. **Demographic decline and territorial dispersion:** Over the past three decades, the community's population has declined significantly due to aging, emigration to Germany, and assimilation. The territorial concentration of the community, which was once centered on the regions of Silesia and Opole, has become less pronounced as younger generations move away and assimilation weakens ethnic identity. The declining population has had a direct impact on voter support, naturally reducing the number of voters who actively support minority organizations.
2. **Internal organizational challenges:** Community political organizations faced internal conflicts, leadership disputes, and generational rifts, which weakened their traditional support base. Some voters turned to regional or national parties that, while not specifically focused on minorities, offered broader political appeal.
3. **Changes in voter behavior and the political situation:** The German minority organization's electoral support declined in recent elections, and even in their traditional strongholds, their support weakened. The use of the mobilization index revealed that the participation of the community's voters declined more significantly in relation to the size of the population, especially after the 2015 elections. The voter base faced a dilemma in the 2023 elections, and the intense political competition led

to record-high voter turnout and strategic voting, with many voters preferring national parties over the minority organization.

4. Impact of electoral competition: The 2023 elections were characterized by intense rivalry between political parties or blocs. Instead of benefiting the minority organization, the record-high turnout often led to a shift toward national parties or abstentions, reflecting a strategic change among voters.
5. Assessment based on the mobilization index: Analysis of the mobilization index showed a steady decline in electoral support for the German minority organization. The index integrates population data, turnout, and vote share, and shows that despite efforts to appeal to regional and ethnic constituencies, the community's electoral participation has declined. According to the index calculations, support fell below the threshold required to win a parliamentary seat in 2023, resulting in the community losing its representation for the first time since Poland's democratic transformation.
6. Regional and political adaptation: Despite losing representation in the national parliament, the community continues to wield considerable influence at the regional level, primarily through regional and local governments and cultural institutions.
7. Broader implications: The loss of parliamentary seats by the German minority exemplifies broader problems faced by ethnic minorities in Europe: demographic decline, internal organizational challenges, and the changing political situation, particularly the rise of illiberalism and ethnopopulism in Central and Eastern Europe, threaten the political representation of minorities.