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Official Use of Minority Languages. Between Symbolic Politics and Local Public Policies

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of the article is to examine the circumstances of introduction and subsequent functioning of the minority language from the perspective of local authorities. The hypothesis that bilingualism is a part of the creation of a multicultural image of communes, as well as an element of their promotion and strategic development has been verified.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main problem of the publication is the non-symbolic daily practice of language policy in 33 communes that introduced an auxiliary minority language. In the research process, the analysis of evoked sources, critical analysis of content posted on the Internet and the case study method were applied.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The argument consists of four main parts. The first part discusses the symbolic use of the minority language. The second part presents basic information on the Polish context of policy towards minority languages. The third part presents the main assumptions and results of empirical research. The last part of the paper is devoted to theoretical remarks on the limitations of the analysis of public policy in relation to social phenomena heavily loaded with symbolism.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Research shows that non-symbolic language policy practices are rarely used. Local authorities do not promote the possibility of communicating in a minority language and do not use it themselves. Communes

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that have introduced a minority language as an auxiliary language rarely use bilingualism in the creation of a local brand or as an element of tourism promotion or in the context of cross-border cooperation in the development of business.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Identity-oriented preferences differ from preferences public policy typically deals with because they do not fulfill the instrumental rationality expectation assumed by the public policy analysis.

KEYWORDS:

minority language, symbolic politics, local public policies, bilingualism, auxiliary language

The language policy has been rarely a subject of public policy scholars interest. Even though governments widely use policies to promote (or discourage) official and sometimes private use of particular languages these issues seem to be on the outskirts of the public policy analysis as a discipline. This article suggests that the reason may be not only a niche character of the language policy vis-à-vis health or social policy but also internal constraints of the public policy analysis itself. The discipline is based on the rational public policy paradigm and faces major problems when it comes to dealing with activities inherently focused on a symbolic dimension of social life like language policies.

Policies arising from a version of symbolic politics as a troublesome field for policy analysis are manifested well in the case of the official use of minority languages. Geographical names used in minority languages, name plates, road signs but also using minority languages in official activities of authorities are always parts of a language policy. Nevertheless they are rarely analysed with the use of conceptual frameworks developed for other public policies. A substantial literature on language policies assumes that all policy tools used by policy-makers simply actualize symbolic objectives important in this policy.

In the following study we focus on the overlooked dimension of the language policy towards minority languages. We do not argue against the symbolic importance of the official use of the minority

language but we try to verify if there is more to the issue, i.e. if these tools are used for local public policies in Polish communes (*gmina*) which introduced a minority language on their territories. We draw our hypothesis from basic assumptions of the public policy analysis: if local governments went through the conflictual process of the recognition of a minority language they will try to use it to the fullest in their local public policies. They will use the tools they receive at worst in order to recover costs incurred if not to achieve some strategic local policy goals.

Therefore in this article first we introduce a standard (i.e. symbolic) understanding of the official use of the minority language, then we provide a basic information on the Polish context of the minority language policy in order to go over main points of our empirical research. It was focused on the alleged non-symbolic, local public policy-oriented official use of minority languages in Polish communes. As our research proves that the non-symbolic use hardly exists we conclude the article with theoretical remarks on the constraints of public policy analysis applied to social phenomena heavily loaded with symbolism.

SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE POLICIES

National and ethnic minorities are vulnerable when it comes to their languages. Linguistic sphere most often constitutes the groups and defines the limits allowing to differentiate them from the rest of society. Awareness of ethnic limits enables to channel the social life and thus entails a complex set of behaviours and social attitudes (Barth, 1969; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Thanks to the language, it becomes possible to name and create places that allow to enhance the sense of “feeling at home” – both these private and public ones (Tuan, 1991; Edensor, 2002). An essential part of a relation of cultural landscape (defined by multiple factors of various provenance: geographical, social-ethnic, cultural, political or economic) with functioning of minority groups is a life span of their language. Visual and audible symptoms of presence of their own speech in the public space allow minority members to participate actively in the process of forming the linguistic landscape of respective countries (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Dołowy-Rybińska, 2013).

The adoption of a specific strategy towards languages of minorities poses a challenge for governments as a language policy interferes with the symbolic sphere i.e. it is a potential source of conflicts. Its implementation entails “flagging” the public space as co-owned by the minority, and also defines a potential scope of development of minority languages since naming a place is a performative act. It allows to construct and/or contest identity ‘conflates place and group identity because of the shared context of using and referring to toponyms’ (Alderman, 2008, p. 196; Nijakowski, 2006; Łodziński, 2016a).

OFFICIAL USE OF MINORITY LANGUAGES IN POLAND

The above theoretical framework explains well the procrastination in the process of granting linguistic rights to national minorities in Poland. It took fifteen years for a democratically elected parliament of Poland to accept a law on national minorities. The Act on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional languages of 6th January 2005 introduced the possibility of the official use of minority language in two dimensions. First of all, minority language may be used as “supporting” (auxiliary) by the commune authorities which means that “persons belonging to a minority (...) shall have the right to apply to the municipal authorities in the supporting language, either in a written or oral form [and] obtain (...) an answer in the supporting language...” (*Act*, 2005, art. 9.3).

The regulation stated also that geographical names may be used on official signs and road signs in the minority language simultaneously with names in Polish. Whereas the first dimension of the official use is restricted to communes where at least 20 per cent of inhabitants declared respective national minority identity in the census the latter is contingent on a local deliberation process: it may be introduced by the commune council but a process of formal consultations is needed (in communes above the 20 per cent threshold it is not obligatory). In any case it is the local government that plays a crucial role as the formal decision-maker of the whole process of the minority language recognition. The Ministry of Interior which runs the official registers of dual language local authorities and geographical names does not

enjoy the liberty to refuse the commune council motion once statutory requirements are fulfilled.

As a result of the regulations introduced in 2005 first bi-lingual signs were eventually ceremonially unveiled in Radłów/Radlau in Upper Silesia in September 2008 and since then 33 communes had been registered as dual (auxiliary) language local authorities and 60 communes had used dual geographic descriptions (2018 data). It should be stressed that the threshold of 20 per cent minority identity declaration in census passed 51 communes, so roughly 60 percent of eligible communes decided to introduce minority language as the official auxiliary language. Whereas 22 out of 28 eligible communes with the German minority introduced dual official language only 5 out 12 Belarusian communes took this step.

Table 1
Official use of minority languages in Poland's communes

Language	20 percent threshold passed (2011 census)	Communes with auxiliary use	Communes with minority place-names
Belarussian	9	5	1
German	22	22	31
Lithuanian	1	1	1
Kashubian	19	5	25
Lemko/Rusyn	0	0	2
TOTAL	51	33	60

Data: *List of minority place-names in Poland according to Register of the communes where place-names in minority language are used provided by Ministry of Administration and Digitization as of March 20, 2018.* Retrieved from: http://ksng.gugik.gov.pl/english/files/list_of_minority_names.pdf.

This discrepancy is partly linked to a potential for fueling conflict once the minority endeavors the official language recognition (Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2011, pp. 229-243). A study on the introduction of German place-names in Silesia quotes dozens of examples where Polish majority opposed, sometimes violently, the installation of the official place-name plaques. Most often it took a form of the hate speech in the internet but also defacing the bi-lingual signs (Choroś, 2012; Choroś, 2017). A report commissioned by the regional governor

of the Opolskie Voivodship registered 120 cases of vandalizing the plaques during less than two years but admitted that many communes did not record such incidents; most probably because they became “facts of nature,” as stated a leader of the German minority in Silesia (*Dwujęzyczne*, 2009; Choroś, 2017).

According to a national survey conducted ten years after the minorities act had been introduced more than a half of the interviewed Poles (51 per cent) did not allow the possibility that national and ethnic minorities would have a right to communicate in their own languages in local offices; 41 per cent agreed to such a state of affairs and only 8 per cent were of no defined opinion (CBOS, 2015).

Although the very process of the official recognition of minority language perhaps cannot be called very burdensome but it demands a relatively “high degree of the institutionalization of cultural differentiation” (Sadowski, 2011, p. 58). Most often a minority organization initiated the process, which demanded the mayor and commune council to take a position, sometimes a name had to be chosen, as in Upper Silesia there were variant place-names after the Germanization of local toponyms by the Nazi government in the 1930s (the 2005 Act prohibited using those names). Eventually, the application to the Interior Ministry had to be prepared. This procedure was challenging for small rural communities and it was especially valid for communes with less than 20 per cent of minority declarations where the success of the efforts depended to a great degree on the minority mobilization in the consultation procedure. The process involved sometimes conflicts with the Polish majority or rather its fraction opposing exactly the aim of the minority – flagging or marking the territory as minority co-owned.

IN SEARCH OF A NON-SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF THE OFFICIAL USE

These circumstances justify an assumption that if all those endeavors are undertaken we may expect that the local authorities would like to obtain from their efforts as much as possible. The communes embarking the recognition path get new policy tools so it is rational to expect them to use these instruments at least to recover the costs

incurred. Therefore, apart from the official place-names in minority language, important for the symbolic politics of minority empowerment, we may expect other measures to be taken by the communes recognizing a minority language. These measures may be called non-symbolic, though undoubtedly a possibility to address a local officer in a minority language has a symbolic dimension as well. In our research, conducted a decade after the 2005 act started to be implemented (2018), we examined these non-symbolic daily routines of the language policy in 33 communes that introduced an auxiliary minority language.

As the most important practical result of the official use of minority language was that members of minority received the right to address commune organs in their language, we wanted to learn if the local authorities were prepared to receive communication in minority language and if this communication was really initiated by local citizens. Second, we wanted to check if local authorities used the minority language to initiate communication with inhabitants or general public. Third, we wanted to verify the hypothesis that the “bilingualism became frequently a part of a multicultural image created by the communes and an element of their promotion” (Łodziński, 2016, p. 226) or potentially even their development strategies.

The research procedure consisted of three steps. First, we inquired all 33 communes with auxiliary minority language about the extra bonus the commune might pay to its officials for using the minority language (an indicator of communication preparedness) and the number of correspondence from citizens addressed to the commune in minority language (an indicator of the real-life official communication). Then we searched official websites of the communes looking for communication in the minority language and information about minority-linked activities with the participation of commune organs. Eventually we used internet search engines to investigate minority-linked activities with the participation of organs of all communes using minority language in order to reconstruct the role minority languages played in communes’ public policies.

Despite repetitive efforts we received 18 reliable answers from the 33 communes asked (54,5 per cent). The refusal instances most often were also telling: the officials chased by our phone calls did not feel competent to answer and we were transferred to other officials

but they were not knowledgeable enough either. Two answers, difficult to assess ones, are particularly worth-mentioning. In both cases commune secretaries, a position demanding a substantial degree of proficiency in legal matters, insisted that their communes were not entities with the auxiliary minority language. Despite the fact that commune council ordinances with this decision were available on the commune website (respectively German and Kashubian language).

Those experiences went hand in hand with the results we did receive. They were unambiguous: even if the local authorities were prepared to communicate in minority language they were not expected to do so. In 12 out of 18 communes there was virtually none correspondence in the minority language. In the communes which received queries in the minority languages most often it was a single-digit volume during 5-6 years the communes were officially bilingual. The only exceptions were Biała/Zülz in Silesia where there was 20 letters or e-mails in German and perhaps Leśnica/Leschnitz where such a correspondence turned up "from time to time" (but the commune did not run such statistics). All instances of the minority language communication involved German with the only exception being Żukowo commune which received two letters in Kashubian.

In this context it cannot be a surprise that local authorities do not invest into the communication in the minority language. We recorded only five instances when a commune paid an extra bonus to officials proficient in the minority language (German, Belarusian, most often a single person in the commune office). However, very often we were told that commune officials can communicate in the minority language and sometimes our respondent was even able to estimate that "60 percent of our employees can speak German" (Komprachcice/Comprachtschütz).

On the other hand the local authorities do not promote the possibility to communicate in the minority language and do not use it themselves. In our research we investigated the internet in search of a communication from the local authorities in minority languages. There were only three (two German and a Lithuanian) out of 33 communes which had an official webpage in their minority language though as a rule the pages linked the Google Translator enabling an automated translation. It should be stressed that almost all researched communes had very professional webpages and apparently used

them for a real communication with their inhabitants and not only as a display window for strangers.

Still, we were aware of the fact that the virtual reality is not a prime location of the public sphere in Poland's rural communities. Therefore we wanted to supplement our investigation with representations of non-virtual reality and searched the internet for images of posters, bulletin boards with announcements, public events etc. Although this kind of procedure cannot claim to return a representative image of the public sphere we found for example astonishingly numerous posters advertising local feasts organized or sponsored by local authorities. Posters solely in a minority language were displayed only in Puńsk/Punskas but there were several bi-lingual posters in Belarusian. Interestingly enough, there was almost no bi-lingual posters from Silesia. Posters were in Polish even if they advertised a harvest festival combined with presentations of German minority dance and music groups and the event was sponsored by the German consulate (*Erntedankfest*, 2018).

These results corroborated an earlier study of Upper Silesia arguing that the mobilization to obtain bi-lingual signs was linked to "the emotional and not pragmatic side of life" (Choroś, 2012, p. 141) and the possibility of the official use of German influences local public sphere to a very limited degree. One of our respondents from Jemielnica/Himmelwitz argues that officials do not use German because they do not need – everyone understands Polish so there is no need for German and German is used mainly when the commune office is addressed by children or grandchildren of former residents who emigrated to Germany during the communist era. This probably might be also a conclusion of the first part of our empirical research: the local authorities do not use language policy tools they produced because neither they nor the inhabitants from the ranks of the minorities need them. Fifty years of the communist regime language policy effectively eliminated minority languages from the public sphere and made Polish a "natural" language of communication in public and for public purposes (Kamusella, 2009, pp. 573-644).

Allegedly, there is an exception – Puńsk/Punskas commune. Although the local authorities did not answer our questions we established effortlessly that unlike in other communes under research Puńsk used Lithuanian for communication between commune organs

and inhabitants. It was not only fully bi-lingual webpage (though the Polish version was updated regularly and the Lithuanian only periodically) but also official announcements displayed in both languages. We may also infer from names of commune officials that a communication in Lithuanian cannot be a problem in the office. This conclusion was not a surprise as Puńsk is a well-researched community and its idiosyncrasies are well-know (Barwiński, 2014, pp. 137-153).

First of all it is one of two relatively most minority-populated communes in Poland – according to the 2011 census there were 75.7 per cent of Lithuanians in Puńsk. Moreover, majority of the Poland’s Lithuanian minority live in the commune, so it has become a focal point of their activities with schools, a publishing house, societies. As a consequence, local authorities are also dominated by Lithuanians with the vogt always coming from the ranks of minority as well as 80 to 90 per cent of commune councilors. It should be also stressed that a specific feature of the Lithuanian identity is centrality of the language and this is well-indicated by the census declarations: almost all Lithuanian minority respondents used Lithuanian at home and 63 per cent of them used exclusively this language (*Wyniki*, 2008).

This striking difference between Puńsk and other bi-lingual communes in Poland is also highly visible in the last aspect of our empirical study of non-symbolic use of the minority language – strategic use of the bi-lingualism as a resource in the commune development. Earlier research suggested that under the influence of European aid programmes cultural assets became marketable assets. As a consequence the sphere of culture became a tangible good used for the city/village marketing; “in the game with financial means at stake local cultural assets became an advantage” (Bartkowski, 2009, p. 147). Cultural diversity turned out to be “a trump card” and “calling cards of local communities” in the fundraising but also in more strategic commune positioning activities (Wojakowski, 2016, p. 152).

Communes officially recognizing a minority language seem to be exceptionally well placed when it comes to creating a local brand or just a promotional image of a special locality for the tourism or trans-border business. The reconstruction of such local development strategies is not an easy task as officially accepted development strategies are often fictional documents produced for the sake of aid

programmes. Therefore they might be a source but have to be supplemented by an analysis of (more or less) programmatic statements by local officials if not real-life projects executed by the communes over years. However, a sheer review of programmatic documents of the communes under research proved substantial differences among them.

Puńsk recalls its Lithuanian character in several places and contexts of the 2003 commune development strategy. It rarely is constructed as a cultural asset and the concept of multiculturalism is never used. It is more a fact of nature influencing for instance commune education policy or the character of cultural events organized or sponsored by the commune. If it is phrased as an asset the context is the trans-border co-operation in terms of business and local infrastructure development (*Strategia rozwoju*, 2003).

The only commune supporting the hypothesis that multiculturalism might be used as a resource by bi-lingual communes is Chrzastowice/Chronstau. In its development strategy “the commune perceives itself as a nurturer of locally existing interactions of the German and Polish cultures. (...) Residents are proud of the cultural osmosis respecting and supporting culture, language, traditions, customs present locally” (*Uchwała nr XXXIII.271.2014*, 2014, p. 57). The commune introduced also a bi-lingual, early education programme in its kindergarten and was the first place in Poland to have bi-lingual signs in the railway stations on its territory, despite a controversy it stirred. During the ceremony of their unveiling the commune’s vogt stated: “Thanks to this [bi-lingual plates] we’ll be international and go-ahead because we set new standards” (*Protest*, 2012).

We did not find this kind of conscious approach to the creation of “the international commune” brand in other local authorities. Leśnica/Leschnitz, one of very few communes using the minority language in the communication with its population, a place where the German Minority has 12 out of 15 councilors in the commune council, in its development strategy mentions the German heritage only in the historical context or when cultural activities are reported (*Strategia rozwoju*, 2011). This lack of the German presence relevance seems to be typical for bi-lingual communes of Upper Silesia. They may be ready to admit that the knowledge of German among their inhabitants is an asset or even unconsciously disclose that “German-speaking

economic and cultural space” is their point of reference but it does not mean investing in an image of an exceptional because multicultural commune (*Strategia rozwoju*, 2012).

If a minority culture is mentioned as a part of the public image of the commune it plays a peripheral role as one of ingredients of the local flavour. It is most evident in cases of Kashubian communes which built their development strategies on (eco)tourism. A possibility to meet manifestations of a different (minority) culture is another good reason to visit the place, as pure lakes, fishing, ecological local food are. Signs with dual names are in this context a set or scenography lending credence to the narrative.

There is also one example directly contradicting the hypothesis on the usefulness of multiculturalism/bi-lingualism as a tool for the local development. A short development strategy of Czyże/ЧЫЖЫ commune of 2000 phrased as a SWOT analysis mentions among commune’s weaknesses that “the commune is inhabited by the national minority (discrimination in terms of financial means distribution)” (*Uchwała Nr XIV/79/2000*, 2000). Apparently, what for Puńsk (75,7 Lithuanian minority population) was a fact of nature and possibly an advantage for Czyże (76.5 Belarusian minority population) was a burden. To do the justice to the latter it should be mentioned however that a fresh Local Re-Vitalization Programme for Czyże Commune defines also a goal to “built a local identity founded on a cultural and historical heritage, especially taking the advantages of the national minority” (*Lokalny Program*, 2017, p. 66).

This evolution of the self-perception of being a minority might be probably a conclusion from our research. Although local governments produced policy tools for using their ethnic/linguistic diversity as a resource for their local policies they first focused on the very establishment of the fact that they are ethnically/linguistically diversified localities. The subject of the language policy in Poland apparently was the identity and non-symbolic policy-oriented measures foreseen in the 2005 Act were allegedly superfluous if not redundant. As a leader of the German minority commented: “When you see all those bi-lingual plates in our region you realize that the [2005] Act achieved its task. Simply, you can see the plates and therefore you can see that members of the minority live here” (Henryk Kroll as cited by Ogiolda, 2015).

THEORETICAL CONSEQUENCES

This conclusion, however, suggests that there are policies which do not fit easily into public policy analysis template. Identity-oriented preferences differ from preferences public policy typically deals with because they do not fulfill the instrumental rationality expectation assumed by the public policy analysis. If “a rational individual is one who combines his or her beliefs about the external environment and preferences about things in that environment in a consistent manner” (Shepsle & Bonchek, 1997, p. 19) somebody risking a conflict for language policy tools who does not use them later is not rational. Leaders of the German minority in Upper Silesia knew that German was not the language of the community they represent and it was confirmed by our research of its public use in formally bi-lingual communes. What they were fighting for was not a language policy but an identity recognition or a minority empowerment.

An argument that they simply concealed their true preferences or misperceived the measures which might be used to achieve their true preferences would not solve the theoretical puzzle of public policy analysis because at the same time they really wanted the language policies to be introduced. The public policy analysis theoretically extricated itself from the strong rationality assumption of its early period and admitted a possibility of contradictory or unclear preferences. On the other hand in practice it still assumes a maximalization of utility and a possibility of comparing two states in terms of preferences achievement. Apparently, if the utility means a symbolic gain such comparisons are not always possible. It is better for the minority to have bi-lingual name plates than not even at a cost of conflict. But is it better to have a right to address an official in language not used for official communication for a half of century? Probably yes, if it is free. But if it involves costs, can we compare a potential symbolic gain and tangible costs or costs of a conflict with the majority?

In 1964 Murray Edelman introduced the term “symbolic politics” which became a popular way of explaining apparently irrational behavior of political actors. Edelman’s assumptions were quite strong. He did believe that politics is focused on tangible outcomes and elites use myths and rituals to manipulate mass public for their own good. Political myths and rituals provide the masses – anxious about

a threatening complex world – with a symbolic reassurance, reduce the tension (Edelman, 1964; 1985; Sears, 1993).

We are far from this vision of politics but the concept itself is a good hint for public policy scholars. Symbols-related preferences are not only impossible to reduce to other preferences but easily tolerate alleged contradictions and irrationality.

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