



Coexistence International at
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Slava Madorsky

Background

The Republic of Poland has a population of just over 38 million, and shares borders with Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia. Centuries of religious tolerance and organization as a voluntary state union made the territory of Poland an attractive place for a variety of religious and ethnic groups, including German Protestants, Jews, and Greek-Orthodox Russians, as well as a good home for the indigenous minority populations. By the start of the Second World War, national minorities constituted a third of Poland's population.¹

World War II saw Poland's demographics shift tremendously. Jews, who before the war made up 10 percent of the total population (30 percent in major cities and up to 70 percent in many towns), were almost entirely exterminated by the Nazis. Poland's Roma population, though not as large (estimated at 30,000-50,000)² met with much the same fate. After the war, expulsions, displacements, and relocations of Germans, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and other national minorities completely altered the national landscape. Territorial shifts in the East and West contributed to the changes in the ethnic make-up of the country. Furthermore, fearing reprisals and seeking national unity, 95 percent of the Polish residents registered themselves as Poles, essentially establishing Polish homogeneity.³

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Coexistence International

Mailstop 086
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5017
781-736-5014 fax
www.coexistence.net
coexistenceintl@brandeis.edu



Slava Madorsky is a MA student in the Coexistence and Conflict Program at Brandeis University. She has worked for various organizations, including the International Organization for Migration, the Auschwitz Jewish Center in Poland, and the Greater Washington Area Chapter of Hadassah.

Under communism, Poland's minorities underwent significant changes and repressions in every aspect of life. Indigenous populations such as the Kashubians, Slovincians, and Mazurians, among others, were subjected to a process called "verification of autochthons," which made second-class citizens of anyone who had been registered as German during the war. Most Germans were forcibly deported into camps, where they were held until they could be transferred into Germany. Thousands of Byelorussians were subject to "repatriation" to the Soviet Union. The remaining Roma were forcibly settled and their nomadic lifestyle outlawed. The few remaining Jews were initially denied the right to leave, but only until 1968, when they were essentially forced to emigrate from Poland. Almost the entire ethnic group of Lemks (30-35,000), along with 140,000 Ukrainians, were resettled and scattered throughout Poland. Official propaganda accused them of murder and violence against Poles, making them hated everywhere they were settled. Lemks, as a group, were meant to be destroyed or absorbed into the mainstream through this process.⁴

Suppression of minority identities and homogenization was one of the main policies of the Communist regime in Poland. The use of local languages, as well as the use of national costumes of groups, was banned even in the home. Names, both personal and geographical, were subject to Polonization. Educational policies, hiring practices, admissions to universities, and inclusion in political life were all subject to severe ethnic filtering. Houses of worship, such as synagogues and non-Roman Catholic churches, as well as cemeteries and numerous cultural landmarks, were desecrated, banned, or converted for state or commercial use (e.g. as schools, warehouses, movie theaters, and on one occasion a swimming pool). Cultural events, as well as independent minority organizations, were outlawed.⁵ In their place, national minorities were allowed to form one organization each, which was then used as an instrument of control by the Communist state government.⁶

Current State of Coexistence

Though some initiatives surfaced during the period of Communist oppression, it was the year 1989 that brought with it big changes for minority groups. The fall of communism and Poland's reemergence on the international scene made changes in minority policy an imperative for several reasons. The first was Poland's desire to integrate into the European Union and other Western structures, which required adherence to certain international human rights standards. Conflicts with neighboring states over the treatment of their minorities within Poland's borders likewise had to cease if Poland was to gain acceptance to the EU. The second was the changing geopolitical context; Poland had found itself surrounded with new neighbors, all of which contained significant Polish minorities, old and emerging. To ensure their protection, Poland needed to be able to make a commitment to these nations that their own minorities would be protected as well. The third reason was Poland's transformation into a democracy, which meant that national minorities now had a voice in the country's politics and required representation in all levels of government.⁷

According to the 2002 census, national minority groups in Poland consist of (in thousands) Germans (152.9), Byelorussians (48.7), Ukrainians (31), Roma (12.9), Russians (6.1), Lemks (5.9), Lithuanians (5.8), Slovaks (2), Jews (1.1), Czechs (0.8), Tatars (0.5) and Karaimi (0.05).⁸ Other minorities immigrated to Poland throughout the last century. They are mostly Greeks, Macedonians, Hungarians, French, Serbs, Bulgarians, Georgians, Palestinians, Kurds, and Vietnamese. Their numbers are poorly reported on the census, but estimates suggest that their societies consist of several hundred to over 2,000 people.⁹ The size of the Jewish population, too, is poorly reported (their numbers are cited by various sources as ranging between one and twenty thousand people), since many of them still fear being recorded in the census or being known in their communities as Jews.

Although these minorities constitute only 2-3 percent of Poland's population, the country's historical consciousness

as “a motherland of national minorities”¹⁰ and its memory of a painful past, combined with the factors mentioned above, have made coexistence work a priority at all levels of government and civil society. Though still far from a perfect system, tremendous progress has been achieved in the last 17 years.

Policies and Initiatives

Constitution

One of the first steps was the enshrinement of the protection of minorities in the new Polish Constitution. Though it was not finalized until 1997, a shorter version was in place by 1992. The new constitution provides for legal protection of all national and ethnic minorities and specifies the responsibilities of the state in these matters. One aspect that is problematic is the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a “national minority” in Polish law. The term is most often taken to mean Polish citizens who are historically native to the Polish lands and are not immigrant in their origin. For instance, Greeks and Macedonians, even generations born in Poland, do not qualify as “national minorities” because they first migrated to the area in the 1950s. Furthermore, constitutional protection is not fully applied to new immigrant populations such as the Vietnamese,¹¹ whose numbers have grown quickly in the last 17 years (exact figures are not available, but the 2002 census recorded 1,808 Vietnamese living in Poland, while the Council of Europe report estimates their number at 30,000).¹²

Nonetheless, the Constitution has made significant provisions for minorities that were missing from the old constitution of 1952. Some of those provisions include: the right to maintain language, customs, and traditions; the right to create educational and cultural institutions; the right to set up institutions that protect minority rights; the right to participate in decisions that affect their group; access to public media; and electoral privileges. Electoral privileges ensure the possibility of representation in the parliament. The right to religious freedom provides for the recognition of religious holidays, education, and services in all branches of society, including the military. Other principles of equality and freedom of speech and expression contained in the new Constitution further support the rights of national minorities.¹³

International Treaties and Conventions

Poland has ratified numerous conventions and signed treaties which obligate it to uphold international laws pertaining to human rights and the treatment of minorities. Some of the international instruments ratified by Poland are

the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (and its Optional Protocol, which gives individuals access to the Human Rights Committee); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. This is only a fraction of the instruments ratified by Poland. Treaties include those signed with Germany (1991) and Lithuania (1994) and are meant to establish good neighborly relations and mutually guarantee protections for minority groups living inside the parties’ borders.¹⁴

National Programs

Three national initiatives deserve mention for attempting to create a better environment for minorities. One is the creation of the Commission for National and Ethnic Minorities of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland,¹⁵ which undertakes analysis of minority-related issues, consults with communities, engages in interventions, and participates in the creation of laws. Another is the National Programme for Counteracting Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2004-2009),¹⁶ which works to accomplish its titular goals through the promotion of public awareness and necessary research. The program’s collaborative approach is of note here — central and regional government organs, the Human Rights Ombudsman, public broadcasters, and NGOs are all involved. The third is the Programme for the Roma Community in Poland,¹⁷ which was created together with Roma representatives. The program’s goals are “to improve living and health conditions, to reduce unemployment, to ensure security and prevent racist crimes, and to develop their culture and maintain their ethnic identity,” as well as promote Roma tradition and history and ensure the quality of education for Roma children.¹⁸ These programs are still relatively new, which is why assessment information on their impact is not yet available.

Penal Code and Law Enforcement

Poland’s new penal code carefully addresses any actions that can be construed as discriminatory and provides for the penalization of such actions. It includes acts of violence, destruction of property, genocidal acts, threats, promotion of fascist ideology, incitement to hatred, defacing of public places with racially or ethnically motivated slogans and graffiti, and insults that have a national, ethnic, racial, or religious character. All of the above are punishable by imprisonment, with terms ranging widely in their severity. Fifty-three such acts were identified and prosecuted in the year 2000. Many such offences target Roma individuals but are not always identified as racially motivated. Unfortunately, while a report to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe states that “the Police are ready to

undertake measures ensuring full protection of the laws applicable in Poland, also in cases which may indicate at racial prejudice or discrimination.”¹⁹ Amnesty International reported in 2004 that incidents of “racially motivated harassment and discrimination against Jews, Roma and people of African and Asian origin...had not been properly investigated by law enforcement agencies.”²⁰ While the criminalization of these acts is a good start to ensuring protection for minority groups, the report said that it is not effective enough without appropriate training for both the police and the judiciary for dealing with hate crimes.²¹ The legal system already provides for the possibility of translation of documents and the presence of an interpreter for court proceedings for all non-Polish speaking defendants. These provisions were originally designed to assist foreigners, but the issue of whether they can be applied to members of national minority groups is still open.²²

Media

Poland’s Constitution establishes the right of all minorities to access means of mass communication. Furthermore, the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities specifies that radio and television companies have a public duty to promote knowledge about various minorities and to broadcast programs in their languages. For instance, since the early 1990s, one of Poland’s main national channels has been broadcasting a program called *U Siebie*, which discusses minority issues and is watched by both minority and majority (Polish) viewers.²³ In 2005, Polish public television began broadcasting TVP *Kultura* via satellite — it is a program that addresses cultural issues of both minority and majority populations.²⁴ Additionally, radio programs all around the country, particularly in areas with large groups of minority residents, have appeared over the last 15 years. Programs are delivered in Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and German, and are broadcast on standard local radio channels. Printed media are even more prolific and are partially supported by the state. Over a dozen publications belonging to different minority groups have their publishing costs covered in full by the state. Numerous others receive state funding for up to 80 percent of their costs. Weekly and monthly publications in a variety of minority languages cover subjects that range from news and science to culture and entertainment.²⁵

Education

The right to be instructed in a minority language in a public institution is guaranteed by the Polish Constitution and the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities. Further, the Act allows for minority history and geography to be taught in public schools. Several options are available to minority students for obtaining education in their language. Three different types of school systems and one inter-school program have been designed to facilitate the process. The

types of schools are: non-Polish language schools, which teach all subjects except Polish language and literature in the language of the minority group; bilingual schools, which split their time equally between the two languages; and schools with additional study of a minority language, which teach the minority language in addition to the mainstream Polish curriculum. When an insufficient number of students in each school demonstrate interest in the study of a particular language, inter-school groups are organized for them by the schools in question.

Three problems face the schools with minority language education: a lack of textbooks, a lack of qualified teachers, and a lack of appropriate facilities. The Ministry of National Education has in the past provided financing to minority schools, which on occasion led to protests from the local Polish population. Both books and teachers are most often imported from those countries where the language of instruction is spoken, but this process has not proven to be sustainable. Teacher exchanges with those countries, as well as special training in instruction, have been undertaken in an attempt to remedy the situation.²⁶ In the 2001-2002 school year, minority-language instruction was available in 620 schools and provided for 41,905 students.²⁷

Culture

Polish cultural policy under communism was marked by severe censorship and oppressive regulations dictated by a central authority. Since then, in cultural matters, the Polish government has undertaken a process of devolution of authority to the regional and local level. A general set of guidelines is presented by Poland’s Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, but these do not need to be adhered to by the local policy-makers. The central Polish government, however, continues to finance certain cultural activities and organizations dedicated to those activities. The National and Ethnic Minorities Cultural Affairs Group (formerly the Department of Culture for National Minorities) allocates funding for minority publications, as well as some cultural events and festivals organized at regional and local levels. Other local activities supported by the group include the protection of minority cultural monuments, restoration of Jewish cemeteries, and conservation of Orthodox religious icons and decorative polychrome. Cultural links with Israel at the government level have become important in the promotion and preservation of Jewish heritage and culture throughout Poland.²⁸

Intercultural dialogue has recently been identified as one of the priorities by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. However, very little has been done at the government level to introduce or support such

initiatives. The bulk of dialogue work is being conducted by NGOs, both local and international.²⁹ One in particular deserves special mention, and is in many ways representative of the type of work being done in different parts of the country. The Foundation Pogranicze, meaning “borderland,”³⁰ which is located in the small town of Sejny near the Lithuanian border, was established in 1990 with the goal of preserving the heritage and culture of the national, ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities that once inhabited the area (Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, Russians, and Germans), and to educate the community about their rich heritage. Among other activities, the Foundation runs cultural heritage classes, a theater, a klezmer music group, a documentation center, an art gallery, and a publishing house. It also brings people together for dialogue and provides training to leaders of cultural and educational institutions in Eastern and Central Europe.³¹ Numerous NGOs throughout Poland undertake projects similar to those of Pogranicze.

Complementary Approach

A complementary approach to coexistence would require that various aspects and levels of society, both structural and psycho-cultural, be addressed by government and non-government programs and initiatives.³² In Poland, the government has undertaken most of the initiatives related to coexistence, with NGOs playing an important part in carrying out most of the cultural- and dialogue-related activities. On the governmental level, constitutional issues have been addressed and relevant provisions for safeguarding the rights of minorities have been introduced. Several government bodies and government-sponsored programs have been created to conduct and facilitate analysis, protection, and positive integration of minorities. International cooperation has been initiated and promoted at all levels of the government and by NGOs. The government has also made an effort to address the legal and security concerns of minority groups through changes to the Penal Code. Furthermore, provisions have been made in the constitution and funding has been allocated for ensuring access to mass media, education in a minority language, and certain cultural activities. Cultural activities not directly supported by the state are then taken up by NGOs, both local and international. Considering the wide range of aspects and issues addressed by Poland’s current coexistence policies, it is safe to say that a meta-approach is being applied in the crafting of these policies.

Conclusion

Since minority groups in Poland currently make up such a small percentage of the population, and because their economic status equals that of the Polish population in any given region (except in the case of the Roma, who continue to be at an economic disadvantage),³³ it is difficult to gauge the impact of the initiatives of the last 17 years. The amount of work in progress is impressive, though most of the more promising initiatives are very new or still in the planning stages. Some of the most gaping holes in the coexistence work currently are the lack of adequate training for members of law enforcement and the lack of provisions and protections for immigrant minorities in Poland. But more and more young people are taking an interest in the multicultural heritage of their country and becoming active in numerous cultural and educational initiatives. Changing political trends in the country, such as the current conservative leadership of Lech Kaczynski, could negatively affect the success of many of the new initiatives. But hopefully the momentum and Poland’s imperative to be in good standing with the EU will carry it through.

Endnotes

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About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series

In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

Other CI Publications

Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

What is Coexistence and Why a Complementary Approach?

Focus on Coexistence and the Arts

Focus on Coexistence and Democracy-building

Focus on Coexistence and Natural Resources

Focus on Coexistence and Security

With this publication series, CI examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

Country Studies

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Coexistence International

Mailstop 086

Brandeis University

Waltham, Massachusetts

02454-9110