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## **The Policy on Public Signage in Minority Languages versus the Language Tradition of the State: A Change in the Linguistic Landscape of Poland?**

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### **1. Introduction**

In January 2005, after several years of work and political disputes, the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and the Regional Language was adopted in Poland (hereinafter as the Act on minorities). It introduced regulations concerning, among other things, the possibility of introducing additional place names in the languages of recognised national and ethnic minorities and a regional language at the local level (municipalities). They practically consisted in adding an appropriate name in the minority language to the official name of a place in Polish, which was especially noticeable on the information road signs at the entrance to and exit from a given place (see: Appendix). The additional place-name has not been officially authorised but had only a symbolic role, i.e. it could not be used in legal transactions, for example, you could post a parcel to an address that contained the place name only in a minority language. By the end of 2020, such names appeared in 62 municipalities (i.e. 2.5% out of 2477 of all municipalities in Poland).

As far as the Polish state's terminology traditions are concerned, place-names in a language other than Polish were the significant political and social change. Until 2005, such regulations have not existed in Polish law. There was a principle of uniform geographical terminology only in the Polish language. It came from historical reasons – during the partitions in XIX century and the period of World War II, place-names in Poland were turned into Russian and German ones. Let us also add that the territorial changes of the post-1945 Polish state also resulted in adding names in minority languages meant the emergence of meanings relating to other historical memories than the one of Poland. All of this made the introduction of place-names in minority languages a challenge that was politically difficult to accept and could also lead to ethnic tensions in minorities regions.

The paper attempts to answer whether the adoption of the Act on minorities – which gives the possibility of introducing additional place names in minority languages – constituted a change in the tradition of Polish naming policy? If so, what was the nature of it and what effects did it have on this policy? The period of 15 years from the moment of its adoption gives the basis for answering these questions. I will try to show that while the Act on minorities was a breakthrough in the state naming tradition in Poland, it was done mainly by protecting the rights of national minorities, especially at the local level. It did not violate the existing traditional naming policy goals and the practical linguistic rules for determining geographical terminology. It extended the naming practice of the state to include the standardisation of place names in minority languages in terms of their language and history.

Theoretically I will base on the assumptions of historical institutionalism and appropriately adapted notions of the “state linguistic tradition” and the “language regime” (Sonntag, Cardinal 2015a; 2015b). I will focus on the naming policy as part of the language policy of Poland and introduce the terms of the “state naming tradition” (i.e. the general goals and principles of the naming policy) and the “naming regime” (i.e. the detailed principles of implementing the naming policy objectives). Poland is one of the few countries in Europe

which, for historical reasons, attach great importance to linguistic research on determining the correct wording and spelling of place names of all localities in their territory.

I will focus primarily on the analysis of the practice of the functioning of the central naming institution in Poland, which is the Commission on Names of Localities and Physiographical Objects (hereinafter referred to as the Commission), which has been operating continuously in Poland with minor breaks since 1934 (Wolnicz-Pawłowska 2019: 123). It is often referred to as a *country commission* [I\_1] as opposed to the second (“foreign”) commission dealing with the spelling in Polish of names of geographical features located outside the territory of Poland<sup>1</sup>. It functions at the Ministry of the Interior and Administration and its tasks include preparing the codification of names of places and physiographic objects, accepting new names, and verifying their linguistic correctness. Its chairman is always a specialist from linguistic sciences (onomastics). The Commission issued opinions on each request made by municipal authorities for additional place-names in minority languages which were decisive.

In the paper I am based on the analysis of the Commission’s resolutions related to applications for minority place names from 54 municipalities. I also conducted four interviews (remotely) with former and current Commission members in February and March 2021 (the interviews are marked with “I” in square brackets and the number, quotes are written in italics). The order of the article is as follows. I will start by presenting the theoretical assumptions of my analysis. Then I will move on to the description of the historic evolution of the naming policy in Poland and the process of introducing additional names, then the Commission’s practice in this area. I will finish the paper with a summary emphasising the theoretical importance of the results.

Finally, a note should be added about the current number of people using minority languages in our country. Poland’s ethnic and linguistic situation is both homogeneous and highly diversified (Wicherkiewicz 2018: 49). On the one hand, Poland can be classified as an ethnically and linguistically homogeneous country. The number of recognised national and ethnic minorities confirmed in the 2011 population census was 286,192 people (0.75% of all Polish residents). This number should also be added to people using the regional language recognised as Kashubian (in the 2011 census – 107,742 people). On the other hand, Polish society remains constantly marked by a tradition of multiethnicity and multilingualism despite these census results. Despite the small share of minorities, their number and diversity remain pretty significant compared to other European countries. The Act on minorities has recognised the linguistic rights of persons belonging to 9 national and 4 ethnic minorities and those speaking the Kashub language as a regional language. From a legal perspective, the recognised languages are 14 national and ethnic minority ones (Belarusian, Czech, German, Hebrew and Yiddish, Karaim, Lemko, Lithuanian, Armenian, Romani, Russian, Slovak, Tatar, Ukrainian) and one regional language (Kashubian). This was what created a specific ethnolinguistic context of the policy of introducing additional place names in minority languages.

## **2. Theoretical assumptions: historical institutionalism and the naming policy**

In paper I rely on the assumptions of historical institutionalism (hereinafter as IH), assuming that the language policy (as including the naming policy as its part) can be treated as a type of public policy (Grin 2005: 449-450). It is understood as the influence of the state

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<sup>1</sup> It is the Commission for the Standardization of Geographical Names Outside the Republic of Poland (it is located in the Office of Surveyor General of Poland) whose tasks include issuing opinions on the applications addressed to it regarding the determination of the original wording and spelling of names of geographical features located outside Poland, preparation of lists of these names and determination of the sound and spelling of Polish names of geographical features located outside Poland.

authority (its various levels and institutions) and civil society representatives on the linguistic diversity and social practices in this field (Sonntag, Cardinal 2015b: 5-8). It is often one of the elements of the ethnic (minority) and cultural policy of the state. I will focus on the role of formal public institutions and their management of place names terminology, i.e. specific legal regulations and political decisions that have an impact on the shaping of official place names of localities and physiographical objects in a country.

The concept of IH as one of the trends of new institutionalism focuses on the study of the origin and evolution of certain institutions and the social effects they exert, proving that the institutional choices made in the past are characterised by a long duration, even when the given institutions cease to exist. Initially, researchers dealt with “big questions” concerning, among others, creating specific political and socio-economic systems, consequences of wars and revolutions, etc. Their interest has been expanded, focusing on analyses of the functioning of mainly certain state institutions and their public policies. They understand institutions as formal organisations, rules and procedures, such as constitutions and statutes, and the relationship between public administration and interest groups. They pose questions about the impact of entrenched cultural and legal-political traditions on their functioning (Steinmo 2008: 13-125; Fioretos, Falletti, Sheingate 2016: 2). Essential analytical tools developed under this approach have become such concepts as “path dependence” and “institutional change” – including terms such as “critical juncture”, “punctuated equilibrium” and “tipping points” (Conran, Thelen 2016: 57, 61, 64).

IH has treated the origin and development of an institution as a discontinuous, two-stage sequence of processes characterized by periods of relative stability (often referred to as "path dependency") interrupted by moments of its change and attempts to maintain its stability (referred to as "critical juncture"). The establishment of an institution is associated with the occurrence of certain “initial conditions” such as economic and social conditions, class alliances, cultural orientations, etc., which mark the path of its continuation. An institution remains path-dependent when it shows relative resistance to change, maintaining the original rules of its operation. The occurrence of various fundamental events, internal as well as external to the institution, may provide its change which sets a new path for its functioning. The effects of choices made in the “critical period” may have a long-term effect as they close the possibility of other choices and lead to such a modification of the institution that generates processes that strengthen the path dependence.

The analysis of institutional changes remains one of the leading topics within the IH. Its attention is focused on the nature of endogenous changes that result from internal attempts to adapt the rules of operation of the institution to the changing environment. There are several types of such changes: “layering” (the institution adopts new rules overlaying them over the old ones, thus changing the effects of their operation), “conversion” (it consists in reinterpreting existing rules so that they serve new purposes), “drift” (old rules are deliberately not adapted to changing conditions), “displacement” (dissemination of new rules undermines the sense of the existing rules of operation), “exhaustion” (which the institution dies because of its excessive growth, reducing the possibility of achieving its original goals). This point of view is important because a series of gradual changes can fundamentally change an institution without apparent external influences on it. They may come more from the process of policy drift and conversion, and the impetus for these changes may come from attempts to adapt to a new political or social context. The factor of time and changes in the external environment are always important here, forcing a discussion on the reinterpretation of rules that may be different from those originally introduced (Conran, Thelen 2016: 62-65).

The concept of IH was referred to by Linda Cardinal and Selma K. Sonntag in their “Introduction” to a volume co-edited on state traditions and language regimes in different countries of the world (2015a) and then in a separate article (2015b). In their opinion, language

policies in individual countries can be explained by referring to their specific history and place in the public policy. Within its framework, decisions have always been conditioned by national traditions, constitutional principles and the political environment (2015b: 7-8). Referring to the notions of the “state tradition” and the “language regime”, they analysed why and how specific language choices were made in different countries. The concept of “state tradition” is based on the constitutional framework defined by the history of a state, setting out the institutions and norms governing the state’s public policies, including the linguistic one. It through elections concerning the status of the official (official) language, the possibility of admitting other languages to the public sphere, etc. and the designation of institutions responsible for it led to the development of a specific “path of dependence” in the language policy. It may, however, change from turning points. In turn, the term “language regime” focuses on the relationship between the state tradition and specific decisions in language policy related to, among other things, the scope of the use of the official language and other languages in the public sphere and the nature of linguistic practices by the assumptions of the state policy. In their opinion, the “language regime” allows for an analytical understanding of the reasons and ways of making decisions within its framework.

These concepts provide opportunities to go beyond sociolinguistic concepts (focusing on the social effects of language policies) and normative concepts that analyse the principles and expectations of language policies (Sonntag, Cardinal 2015b: 6). They provide an appropriate conceptual framework for analysing stability and changes in language policy and allow an adequate understanding of the reasons for language policy choices due to linguistic diversity at local, regional, national and global levels.

In this paper I treat the naming policy as part of the language policy which concerns the official standardisation of place names. The legal status of names is essential as official and unofficial place names are used informally and informally. Official place names are established, changed and abolished by legal acts issued by the state authorities. The prominent role here plays the work of special naming authorities, which is standardisation by establishing a place name and defining the object it refers to, which is essential for the operation of administration, business, electoral law, education, etc. The official naming of places and physiographic objects is always one of the most critical tasks of modern administration and is also a subject of international cooperation within the UN.

In line with the notions mentioned above of the state tradition and the language regime, I will introduce the concept of the “state naming tradition” and the “naming regime”. The former draws attention to the historical conditions and the adopted general legal principles concerning the granting of official names and their standardisation. The latter concerns the principles of practice in this field related to the naming institutions’ specific activity responsible for it. As the Polish linguist wrote: “legal acts are an expression of the state’s linguistic policy in the macro sphere, while standardisation activities, publications (resulting from this activity) and communication with society are situated in the microsphere” (Wolnicz-Pawłowska 2019: 117). While legal acts, such as the constitution and laws on language and naming policy, create a state tradition, the earlier mentioned activity in the microsphere manifests the naming regime.

Although the analysis of linguistic (and naming) policies remains marginal in political and social sciences (Safran 2010: 66), ever more attention is now paid to research on naming mechanisms (Rose-Redwood, Adereman, Azaryahu 2010: 454–456; Puzey, Kostanski eds. 2016). Particular interest is aroused by introducing place-names in a minority language different from the language of official place names. Such names impact increasing the prestige of a minority language and changing its public image, as it is perceived as a language with absolute power and possibilities (Marten, Mensel, Gorter 2012: 1). The introduction of “their” names next to or instead of names in the majority (official) language is not only the result of an administrative action but, above all, an act of recognition of the linguistic and ethnic diversity

of a given area and its historical heritage. It is not only treated as meeting contemporary international standards for the protection of minority rights (included in the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) but also by the expectations of cultural justice. They also arouse social emotions, as place names in minority languages are not so readily accepted by the majority due to competition for a given territory, the memory of historical wrongs, etc. Disputes between their supporters and their opponents usually mean a struggle for “meaning, visibility and presence” in the public space (Raos 2018: 897).

### **3. The state tradition and the naming regime in Poland in 1918–2005**

The regaining of independence by Poland in 1918 created a new situation for the Polish language and the use of place names in it. For the first time in history, it became an official language across the state. The authorities faced challenges related to adopting a uniform official terminology of authorities, offices, units of territorial division for the entire territory of the country, and the determination and, if necessary, new Polonization of place names. This was a reaction to the restriction of the use of the Polish language in the past and was to lead to the elimination of foreign language borrowings in Polish terminology, derived mainly from German and Russian. The legal determination of the status of the Polish as the official language came into force in 1924 when the Act on the use of languages of national minorities was passed in selected provinces of the country in the east of the country (Woźniak 2015: 19).

Initially, there was no official body standardising place names in Poland. Names were collected and established to issue topographic maps and during the population censuses. On the occasion of the population census in 1921, the first multi-volume index of localities was developed, and standard rules for determining the wording and spelling of place names in Polish were introduced. It was intended to eliminate the differences between the country partitions. In 1929, a special naming commission was created, but it did not commence its activity. In 1934, a special regulation was issued to determine place names and real estate numbering which set the goals of the naming policy in Poland until the end of the 20th century. It stated that in public relations, it was allowed to use the place names only in the official form in Polish. Their approval was entrusted to the Minister of Internal Affairs. For this purpose, it was to operate through a particular institution – the Commission for Establishing Names of Places (i.e. Commission). From the members of national minorities perspective (who then constituted about 1/3 of the country’s population), it was not planned to introduce additional place names in their mother tongues (despite the extensive system protecting their rights). This was due to the principle of the exclusivity of the Polish as the language of sign inscriptions in public places, which was in force across the state. It concerned inscriptions on state offices and road signs with the names of places (Ogonowski 2000:155–157).

The first period of the Polish naming policy was related to the needs of the formation period of the Polish national state. At that time, the rules of the “naming state tradition” were created which were based on the domination of the Polish in the public sphere and the uniqueness of the place names in this language subordinated to this goal. Thus, the naming policy was to play a legitimating role for the nation-state and to integrate its territory. The rules of the “naming regime” were also created, which consisted of using the wording and spelling of place names following the rules of the Polish language and referring to their historical origin, the tradition of use and frequency of occurrence on maps and other source materials (Wolnicz-Pawłowska 2019: 119). The effects of World War II strengthened these goals. During the German occupation, the Polish lands were to be Germanized which led to the forced change of the names of places and streets. A similar situation concerned the eastern regions of Poland, which were subject to forced transition after being taken over by the USSR. In these territories,

the Polish language ceased to be official and was replaced by Russian, Belarusian or Ukrainian (depending on the republic to which the territories entered).

After World War II, a “great place names revolution” took place in Poland, related to the West’s shift of state borders. Territorial changes and forced displacement of the population (the German and repatriation of the Poles) necessitated the urgent need to give Polish names to all localities and physiographic objects located in the northwest of the country. Initially, there was a “great confusion” in terms of terminology related to the spontaneous naming activity of local authorities and services (such as the army, railroad or post offices) and the arriving Polish people, which gave Polish names to individual places freely, without respecting historical or linguistic reasons, and scientific sources. Therefore, there was a need for coordinated administrative action for the Polonization of local terminology which was to be an element of the state’s unification policy, help Poles repatriated there to identify themselves with a new place of residence, and also send a signal to the Germans that these areas are now becoming for them “a foreign country” (Wagińska-Marzec 2017: 385).

At that time, not only were the slogans of the need for additional terminology in the languages of national minorities not raised but on the contrary, the total “Polonization” of the geographical and public space was expected. The legal basis for these activities was the revised regulation of 1934, amended in 1948, to include the names of physiographic objects. In 1946, the Commission for Establishing Place Names was reinstated, which from 1948 was called the Commission for Establishing Place and Physiographic Object Names because it added to its tasks assigning Polish official names to geographical objects). Earlier, in 1945, a decree on Polish as the only official language was adopted. The entire naming process was treated rigorously, the old Polish or Slavic forms of Germanized names were restored, and the translation of German names into Polish was deemed not advisable. If a place had its original German name, it was phonetically and morphologically adapted to the Polish language, it was translated, and sometimes a new one was given. In 1945–1951, over 32,000 new Polish place names and 3,000 names of physiographic objects were established (Yoshioka 2007: 274-275).

Until 1989, members of national minorities had almost no rights except the possibility of learning their mother tongue. The policy of assimilation towards these groups was also favoured by the processes of socio-economic changes in Poland, especially industrialisation, migrations from villages to cities and the expansion of mass culture in Polish as well as the Polonizing role of the Catholic Church. They strengthened the natural sociolinguistic processes – linguistic assimilation of minorities and strengthening the Polish language’s dominant position at the expense of other minority languages and dialects. No minority differences were visually visible, whether in the form of commemorations, the creation of memorial sites, the presence of names and signs in minority languages (Kamusella 2009: 620-628).

After the end of operations in the western territories of Poland, the Commission from the beginning of the 1950s focused on drawing up an official list of place names of localities in Poland. They were standardised, and in 1982 a comprehensive list of official place names in Poland was published for the first time, including 111,000 names of places and their parts. Their notation and wording were based on the existing terminology practice of removing names from their dialectal forms and giving them a contemporary meaning similar to the national language. This policy was a continuation of the naming state tradition and historical events, such as territorial and political changes after 1945, even forced the maintenance of these rules.

The democratic breakthrough in 1989 did not immediately directly impact the policy regarding the naming of places. However, it was visible primarily in the decisions of local authorities to de-communicate the names of streets and squares and replace them with figures and symbols of independent character. However, the “decommunization” was not complete (especially in small urban and rural centres) which is why a particular law prohibiting the promotion of communism was adopted in 2016.

The naming policy was governed by the regulation of 1934 and the decree on the State language of 1945. The new Constitution of 1997 included article 27 devoted to the Polish language's official status, but with the proviso that it does not violate the rights of national minorities resulting from ratified agreements international. Thus, it confirmed the Polish language's official status but did not comment on the scope and possibilities of using non-Polish languages by persons belonging to national and ethnic minorities. Thus, it has introduced a model of "moderate monolingual" state. Another event in the naming policy was enacting the Act on the Polish language in 1999 which replaced the 1945 decree. Its purpose was to protect the Polish language in the public sphere and use it in offices and business transactions. At the same time, it stated that its provisions did not infringe the rights of national minorities and introduced the possibility that the inscriptions in Polish in offices and public transport may be accompanied by versions translated into a foreign language.

In 2003 a new law on official names of places and physiographic objects was adopted which replaced the regulation of 1934. It upheld the traditional principle that in public relations, the place names may only be used in Polish in the official version (which was included in the regulations of 1934 and 1948). According to it, the place names are changed only at the request of local authorities (municipal councils) and the final decisions are made by the minister of internal affairs and administration [W1]. It also regulated by the Commission which task was to provide opinions on changes of all places-names in Poland<sup>2</sup>.

#### **4. The critical juncture in policy of place names? Act on Minorities of 2005 and regulations on additional place names in minority languages**

The transformation of 1989 changed the position of national minorities in Poland for the better. A broad package of legal regulations was adopted to preserve their cultural identity and languages (see: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/poland>). The Constitution of 1997 included article 35 which discussed ensuring Polish citizens belonging to national and ethnic minorities the freedom to maintain and develop their language, customs, and traditions and own culture. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities was signed by Poland in 1995 and ratified in 2000; the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was signed in 2003 and ratified in 2009. There was also the process of accession to the European Union (2004), which involved adopting the *acquis* of this institution (especially in the field of anti-discrimination) and compliance with specific democratic standards.

The new legal regulations of persons belonging to minorities also meant extending the rights to use their mother tongue, which concerned teaching and teaching in the public education system, free use of them in private and public, access to public media (radio and television) and creating own media and publishing the press, using personal names and surnames under the spelling rules of these languages. However, there was a lack of regulations allowing the use of minority languages in local offices and the possibility of introducing additional names of towns, streets, public offices, etc. The inclusion of such regulations in the Polish law and their practical application was expected by representatives of national and ethnic minorities and international organisations from the beginning of the 90. of the last century.

The lack of these solutions was a serious political challenge for both politicians and the public. Attempts were made to solve it by adopting a particular law on national minorities containing regulations on the possibility of introducing names in minority languages and using them as auxiliary languages in local offices. Work on adopting this act took a long time, including fears of introducing these possibilities. They were considered premature, not meeting

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<sup>2</sup> It is composed of representatives of the central administration as well as scientists representing history, geography and linguistics, and the commission is always chaired by a linguist - specialist in onomastics.

public needs (as all Polish citizens speak Polish) and local ethnic tensions were feared. Such concerns were publicised in the media and reflected in public opinion polls. Poles declared a high lack of acceptance for introducing this type of place names (63% of respondents were against them, and 26% in favour (CBOS 2005: 13–14).

Parliamentary work on this bill began in 1998. It immediately showed a clear divide between its supporters from left and liberal parties and its opponents from conservative and right-wing parties. In the final works on it at the end of 2004, the subject of a political dispute was the size of the required threshold of exceeding the percentage of persons belonging to minorities living in a given municipality entitling to introducing minority place names. Initially, it was proposed 8%, and then it was increased to 50%. As a compromise solution, a threshold of 20% was adopted. This amount was justified on practical grounds, i.e. the number of municipalities in which these provisions may be applied based on the results of the 2002 population census. In the case of the 50% threshold, the number of possible bilingual municipalities would be only 5, and in the case of 20%, it already gave the number 51. Apart from these considerations, the arguments referring to finish a complete system for protecting minority rights in Poland compliant with European standards, turned out to be necessary (Schwellnus 2009: 122–123, 149–150). The Act was finally adopted in early January 2005.

This Act regulates the preservation and development of national and ethnic minorities' cultural identity and the regional language (i.e. the Kashub language) (Act on minorities: 2005). From the perspective of new linguistic rights, it introduced the possibility of using a minority language as an auxiliary in a municipality where the number of inhabitants belonging to a given minority is not less than 20% of the total population (art. 9–11). It also provided for the possibility of introducing additional, traditional place names, physiographic objects and streets in the minority and regional languages in the municipality (art. 12–15). These place names could be used where the number of inhabitants belonging to a minority (or of speaking the regional language) is not less than 20% of the total number of inhabitants of municipality (based on the results of the last population census) or if the additional place name is accepted during the local consultations by more than half of the participating residents. The latter option was treated as an essential element of the liberalisation for those municipalities which have no chance of exceeding the 20% threshold. The Act also provided that the additional place names may not refer to the names from the period 1933–1945, i.e. names given by the Third German Reich or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the present-day territory of the Polish state.

The procedure of introducing additional place names is carried out at the request of the municipality council which had to be positively assessed by the Commission in terms of their language and history. After it was obtained, they were entered in the special “Register of communes where place names in the minority language are used” (provided by ministry of internal affairs). Additional names of streets, squares, etc. in minority languages were to be established by a resolution of the municipal council after obtaining the consent of the ministry of internal affairs, and additional names of other facilities, such as buildings, railway stations, etc. have to be established by their owners.

Additional place names should to be written with the letters of the alphabet appropriate for the minority mother tongue, taking into account the diacritical marks appropriate for it, and to be placed on joint boards under names in Polish in such a way that the centre of the name in Polish and the additional name were on one axis. The height of the letters (fonts) of both names should be identical. These names were always to be placed after the name in Polish and could not be used alone. They could be introduced throughout the all territory of the commune or in separate places. The costs related to the first introduction of boards with such place names (and physiographic objects) has been financed by the state budget, but the introduction of additional street names and bilingual signs at local offices etc. has been on a burden on the municipal budget.



Despite the change in the political scene after 2005, the Act on Minorities has not aroused political disputes anymore. Attempts to change it in the form of limiting the regulation of bilingualism (they were aimed at the withdrawal of the commune from bilingual regulations when the results of the population census showed that the commune ceased to meet the criterion of 20% of the threshold of citizens belonging to minorities), as well as extending the scope of its application in 2015 (e.g. in the form of extending the use of auxiliary languages and the use of bilingual documents), they did not receive political support. The Act itself and the scope of the established bilingualism has been so far a kind of political compromise. Currently, no work is being done on amendments to this Act, although there are discussions about recognizing the Wymysorys language (Wicherkiewicz 2018: 61-65) and the Silesian languages (Kamusella 2016) as regional languages (which would make it possible to introduce additional place names in them).

However, let us pay attention to the moment of enactment of this act and the meaning of the initial conditions determining the possibilities of its status. Poland's accession to the EU and the role of international organizations (opinions of the Council of Europe) contributed to its adoption. This law was quickly recognized as one of the three main foundations of Polish naming policy, next to the Constitution and the Polish language law (Wolnicz-Pawłowska 2019: 117).

### **5. The long duration of the state tradition and naming regime. The Commission on Names of Localities and Physiographical Objects and its work on additional place names in minority languages**

The Commission has been issuing opinions on requests from local authorities for minority place names from the beginning of 2006 when the first request for additional place names in German appeared. According to the President of the Commission in 2008–2016 it was “a difficult task, sometimes very delicate, because such changes may lead to local social conflicts” (Czopek-Kopciuch 2012: 78-79). Political disputes and national emotions, so visible during the adoption of the Act on minorities, *were in no way present either in the opinions of Commission members or in their work in the Commission* [I\_3]. The Commission's members accepted the law regulations, the more so that similar regulations appeared in neighbouring countries, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia. They also gave examples from Hungary (bilingual and trilingual place names) and from Finland (place names in Finnish, Swedish and in the Sami). They appreciated the possibility of introducing additional names; they visited tourist places where such boards had been placed [I\_1, I\_4]. The municipalities applications were considered relatively quickly [I\_4]), however, the work on them was burdensome for its members: *The applications for additional names in minority and regional languages alone took much time during the work of the Commission, in the period of the highest intensity of reporting, such discussions on them took about one-third of the Commission's deliberations* [I\_2]. Its members – linguists, shared their duties due to their linguistic competencies. Some of them gave their opinion on applications for place names in German, others in Lemko and Belarusian. External experts in Kashubian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian cooperated with Commission [I\_2, I\_3, I\_4].

The Commission gave an opinion on the correctness of the submitted additional names in terms of language and history: *There was certainly no Polonization pressure from the Commission, a given name was always (usually) determined by linguistic and historical (origin) considerations concerning the names* [I\_2]. The substantive part of the Commission's deliberations focused only on the domain of linguists and historians. Other members of the Commission and representatives of the administration played more the role of “postmen”

transmitting the Commission's decisions to the relevant departments of administration, participated in it to a small extent [I\_4]. The negative opinion of the Commission resulted in the refusal to enter the name into register, and therefore it could not be used in the commune. Having received such an opinion, the local authority could amend the proposed additional name in line with the Commission's recommendations and re-submit it for its evaluation. Although the minister of the internal affairs took the official responsibility for the decisions of the Commission, it has not yet taken a decision contrary to the recommendations of the Commission [I\_3].

The negative opinions of the Commission were related, on the one hand, to the conclusions concerning those localities (or those parts of them for which there was no official name established) and, on the other hand, to language and terminology problems specific to individual minority groups. Let us start with the historical issues, which in the Commission's practice concerned different terminology in German. In their case, the criterion was that the proposed terminology did not refer to the period 1933–1945. Therefore, the municipal authorities previously consulted the proposed place names with a regional expert institution. The inquiries concerned historical decisions concerning the origin of place names and the correctness of their wording and spelling in German. In the absence of problems, the Commission wrote that all the proposed names were “historically documented, dating from the 13th–19th centuries”; the statement that “the names sound correct, they are written in the alphabet of the language in which they are used” was sometimes added. The opinions also pointed out that “most of their names are Polish names adapted to the German language”.

The changeability of place names due to the post-war territorial changes of Poland was a problem not only for the Commission but also for the German minority. In the 30s. of the last century, in the areas (here we are talking about the western regions of Poland) which were within the German state, the fight against the so-called “Polish façade”, that is, the Germanization of existing Slavic-sounding place names. Furthermore, these newly introduced names were the only ones remembered by the members of the oldest generation of this minority. They often referred to them as suggestions for additional names. They were preserved in their memory and were used in their family circle, and were found in legal documents such as birth certificates, school certificates, property records, etc. The withdrawal from the postulate of their introduction was one of the most difficult challenges for the local authorities and the leaders of this minority. They argued that the adopted rules prohibiting the return to names from the Nazi period in the law on minorities protected their entire group from accusations of referring to the Third Reich period. They emphasised that it was only about traditional German names with a long historical origin and not about returning to names from the Nazi period (Choroś, Jarczak 2010: 221-223).

For the Commission, the most problems arose in connection with the writing of additional place names in Kashub [I\_2, I\_3, I\_4]. The emergence of terminology proposals in this language resulted from the fact that this language was recognised in the Act on minorities as a regional language (Wicherkiewicz 2011). In the Act on minorities the Kashubian group was defined as a community using this language (art. 19–20). Difficulties resulted not only from the fact that there were many applications for these place names, but they also required specialist linguistic knowledge and expert help. When verifying the terminology, the Commission also relied on the unique Polish-Kashubian dictionary of place names. It adopted general terminology rules as guidelines followed by its authors when standardising terminology in the Kashubian language. These rules included choosing an older name (more etymologically closer) and adopting the spelling and pronunciation of “all-Kashubian” language. Another challenge was to avoid mistakes when rewriting names, as there were cases of incorrect upper diacritical marks. When they were placed on the sign road, they gave rise to local discussions and press criticism of the Commission's work [I\_3]. In the analysed period, 65 names (i.e. 8%

of all recognised additional Kashubian place names) had to be corrected in terms of spelling, e.g. due to the use of inappropriate diacritics. Comments were also made about typos in the inscriptions on the boards: sometimes the names placed at the entrance to the town had diacritical signs (diagonal lines or dots and dashes above the letter e) than the names on the boards on the other side of the town or signposts leading to this town. From 2010, spelling problems in the Kashubian language were easier to solve, as the special board – the Kashubian Language Council adopted a special register of place names with correctly spelt Kashubian names. In the absence of problems, the Commission simply wrote that “names sound correct, are written in the alphabet of the language they are used”.

A similar situation concerned additional place names in Belarusian as their proposals prepared in the standard Belarusian differed from the local spoken varieties of this language. Some of them, according to the inhabitants, had Ukrainian roots [I\_4]. The linguistic situation of additional place names in Lemko was a bit different. Due to the existing division in this community (consisting in the fact that some identify themselves as a separate national group, and some consider themselves as part of the Ukrainian nation) and the resulting differences – the treatment of Lemko as a language of an ethnic minority or as a dialect of the Ukrainian language – the name were consulted with both sides. There were practically no problems with names in Lithuanian. It was a recognition of what already existed and was used naturally in its territory.

The analysis of the Commission’s activity concerning opinions on additional names in minority languages was an extension of the scope of its activities. There was the form of imposing new rules to the old principles of operation resulting from the Act on minorities - the kind of institutional layering (Mahoney, Thelen 2010: 16). This made it possible to maintain both the traditional goals of the naming policy and the practice of their standardization (the “naming regime”) This meant that the additional name should be consistent with the applicable Polish spelling rules, particularly with the rules of combined and separate spelling and capital and small letters. When such names appeared as the only forms, efforts were made to adapt them to Polish phonetics, spelling and inflexion, which was a continuation of the existing rules of used by Polish naming commissions. According to the interlocutor: *rather, it was a change to add another register (special catalog) of place names in these languages and their standardization - and that was a major problem for the Commission* [I\_1].

## 6. “Critical junctures” in policy of place names at the local level?

After adopting the Act on minorities in 2005, the central authorities and representatives of minorities were convinced that few communes would decide to introduce sign roads with additional place names in minority languages. By the end of 2020, they stood at 62 municipalities which introduced 1252 minority place names (out of 102,875 official place names, i.e. 1%). Most of them were introduced in Kashubian (827 names in 27 municipalities), then in German (359 names in 31 municipalities), Lithuanian (30 names in 1 municipality), Belarusian (27 names in 1 municipality) and Lemko (9 names in 2 municipalities)<sup>3</sup>. This is significantly more than the possible number of “bilingual” 51 communes, calculated based on reaching the 20% threshold of persons belonging to minorities according to the 2002 and 2011 population censuses results. To a large extent, it resulted from the procedure of local social consultations (one way independent of exceeding the 20% minority threshold), which was used 18 municipalities (i.e. over a quarter of all) including 13 municipalities with place names in Kashubian, 3 in German and 2 in Lemko. The vast majority of all communes have the status of

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.gov.pl/web/mniejszosci-narodowe-i-etniczne>.

rural municipalities (there are no towns in their area). They are small in number of inhabitants and they are often located peripherally in their regions.

The introduction of minority place names was based on the decisions of municipal councils which thus became the main actors in this process. Although they did not directly impact the nature of the legal rules in the Act on minorities, they were given the freedom to decide their implementation. For them, these regulations were a real moment as they could pursue their naming policy. Unlike any other so far, the naming scheme allowed them to equalise the status of the minority concerning the majority symbolically (Alderman 2008: 195). They referred to the memory of discrimination against them (especially of the older generation), distorting history or treating the minority language as inferior and rural. Political representatives of minorities in the municipal government structures and associations of minority groups played an important role. Acting to implement their linguistic rights, they led to the empowerment of minorities, making them no longer a subject of state policy and becoming independent entities striving to fulfil their rights (Malloy 2014: 17-19).

The interviews with representatives of “bilingual” municipalities have showed that the process of establishing and introducing additional place names was usually lengthy, often lasting several years (Łodziński 2018). Local authorities have not treated it as a simple implementation of legal regulations. It began with a general discussion about the need for such terminology in the commune and then concerned in which localities boards with additional names could be placed. It was very important for them to gain local endorsement and social legitimacy for these names. First, their introduction was justified by legal considerations related to the Act on minorities which concerned each recognised national (ethnic) minority in Poland. Secondly, the historical and ethnic considerations of minorities were necessary, as they made it possible to implement the naming postulates submitted by their organisations for a long time. Thirdly, the argument was also the possibility to fully finance the erection of these boards from the central state budget.

It was by no means a socially easy process, as it was often accompanied by solid national emotions, local social divisions and acts of painting over unwanted place names<sup>4</sup>. There were discussions about them in local mass media and on internet forums, which were largely negative, opposing their presence and emphasising the Polish, national and cultural character of a given region. They were often accompanied by references to recent history (especially the history of world war II). The fact that place names in minority languages had been used earlier in these areas also helped obtain the legitimacy of additional names. Representatives of minority groups used them informally; there was a social memory of them, which was often reflected in their family documents. Therefore, the additional names were not new but built upon old naming practices, making their adoption easier. These disputes have not yet led to any significant ethnic tensions that may be known from other countries. They are currently not arousing much interest. They have become primarily used to society, and some have started to be treated as an element of tourist promotion of a given commune and the entire region.

In general, the establishment of place names in minority languages has meant a significant social change at the local level [I\_1]. It consisted in the official admission of languages other than Polish at the local level thus violating the domination of the state tradition in place names. According to the interviewee: *If the Act on Minorities of 2005 brought about a change, it was a change that was beneficial for all minorities, their history, position and language. As such, it did not influence the direction of Poland's naming policy [I\_1]*. These changes have had also a positive impact on the appreciation of the dialect varieties of the Polish language.

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<sup>4</sup> The introduction of a minority language as an auxiliary was completely different, which practically did not cause any procedural difficulties (i.e. related to obtaining a commune entry in the relevant register) or social difficulties (related to possible negative reactions from the local environment).

## 7. Conclusions

The Act on minorities and the appearance of bilingualism has not constituted a radical institutional change in the Polish naming policy, nor in the Commission's activities. As I tried to present in the paper, it was an extension of the naming practice which was the standardisation of minority place names in terms of language and history and adding them to Polish official names. The most important goals of Polish naming policy from the perspective of the state tradition remained practically unchanged. They still consist of maintaining the Polish national - state community's cultural tradition and the place-names in which the history of the nation is contained (Wolnicz-Pawłowska 2020: 49). But the emergence of new rules in the form of the Act on minorities meant the change in the framework of discussion about the whole language policy in Poland was shifted from national issues (close to the French model) to the civic framework (closer to the British model), in which they are also presented the needs of citizens belonging to national minorities.

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Appendix. Examples of road signs with additional place names in minority and regional languages

a) in German.



b) in Lemko and Belorussian.



c) in Kashubian and Lithuanian.



Source: own collections.