

German Minorities in East and West. A Comparative Overview and Outlook

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Today German minority groups live in four countries in Western Europe and in sixteen countries in Central and Eastern Europe.¹ Their historical origins, size, status, and degree of integration and assimilation differ greatly, not just between east and west, but also within each of these two broadly defined geographic regions.

Depending mostly on these four factors, their perspectives for the future are different as well. Despite the fact that the conditions for the protection of minorities have never been as good in Europe as they are today, the question remains whether some of these German communities will have a future at all.

Between Integration and Assimilation – Ethnic Germans in Denmark, Belgium, France, and Italy

Ethnic Germans in Western Europe share the same history regarding their origin.

None of the German-speaking minorities there came to their present settlement areas as migrants, as some of their ethnic kins in Central and Eastern Europe did, but they have inhabited these territories for centuries, in most cases since the end of large tribal migrations around AD 500. Their current status as national, or in the case of Alsace linguistic, minorities stems from boundary revisions carried out after the First World War and confirmed in 1945 to compensate Germany's neighbours for the losses and

¹ Security concerns were not addressed successfully by these border alterations after 1919. Not only did they not stop Germany from unleashing yet another world war, they also effectively created fifth columns in countries that were most vulnerable to attack. Even for the time after 1945 it is doubtful whether the confirmation of the 1919 borders would have prevented a similar development, if the policy of integration had not tied at least one part of Germany firmly to the western alliance in Cold War Europe.

suffering incurred as a consequence of the two wars and in order to increase their security from possible future German attacks.²

The democratic environment in post-1945 Western Europe in combination with the relative economic prosperity in all four countries and their participation in the various projects of European and Western integration has facilitated the process of political integration of the minorities into the polities of their host-countries. None of the German-speaking populations of the four countries harbours any significant secessionist aspirations or feels discriminated against because of their different ethnic and/or cultural identity. Yet the way there was different in each country, and below the surface the results of this integration process differ as well.

With respect to Denmark, the German minority has developed a trans-ethnic German and Danish ethnic identity, while retaining a German national identity. This *Zweistromigkeit*, as Pedersen has defined it, finds its obvious expression in the self-concept of being German North Schleswigians (among the older generations) or German South Jutlanders (among the younger generations). The fact that a relatively small minority of only between ten and fifteen thousand members, or around 5 percent of the population of the administrative region in which they live, has been able to maintain such a strong sense of its German origins points to the favourable conditions that have been, and are continuing to be, provided for this minority. The framework of the Bonn-Copenhagen Declarations of 1955 secures the position of the German minority in Denmark politically by guaranteeing its members full and equal access to the rights and liberties accorded to all Danish citizens. Increasing cross-border cooperation, which has developed subsequently, and the material and other

² Until the early 1990s, there was also a small ethnic German population in Turkmenistan. In the 1989 census it accounted for a little less than 4,500 people, who had come there during the deportation. The civil war in the early 1990s triggered an almost complete exodus of the Germans from the newly independent country.

support provided by the Federal Republic of Germany have allowed the German minority to maintain its identity as a distinct national group in Denmark. Given the high level of tolerance for, if not to say indifference to, the German minority's insistence on its distinctiveness, the social climate in Denmark is no less favourable than the political conditions. The social and economic integration of members of the minority has certainly also been helped by a long-standing tradition in the minority education system aiming at preparing each new generation for a life in Denmark as well as Germany. In the light of ever closer integration in Europe in which the importance of historically grown rather than politically defined regions is increasing at the expense of traditional concepts of nationhood, the future for the German minority in Denmark with its trans-ethnic identity looks bright.

The total number of the German-speaking population in Belgium is estimated to be around 100,000 about ten times higher than in Denmark. About two-thirds of them fall under the jurisdiction of the German-speaking community (one of the three recognised linguistic communities in the country) and enjoy special rights and protection, as the community has autonomy in all matters related to culture, education, electronic broadcasts, health, welfare, research and technology, and the use of languages. In addition, communal authority also extends to international relations in these areas and to inter-community affairs related to matters of culture and education. Even though one-third of German-speakers in Belgium fall under the jurisdiction of either the French or the Flemish community, some of them can still make use of special linguistic facilities provided for in areas with at least 25 percent German-speakers. For administrative purposes, the German-speaking community is part of the Walloon, i.e., Francophone region. Despite these rather advantageous political conditions, the linguistic situation in which the German-speaking community finds

itself is rather more difficult. In the Eupen and St Vith areas German has official status and is also the language of instruction in schools, but with the exception of the Malmédy area where it is taught as compulsory first 'foreign' language, it is everywhere else subject to strong competitive pressure from both Dutch and French, as the two essential languages in Belgium, and increasingly also from English. Donaldson has thus argued that, while German still exercises a certain attraction as an 'economic' language, allowing its speakers to find a job in neighbouring Germany, it is, at least as far as the Walloon region is concerned, on the decline. The different degree of stigmatisation of German (and Germanness), the geographic dispersion of German-speakers across Belgium in areas where their (linguistic) identity has different constitutional statuses, and the resulting diverse levels of assimilation do not allow the picture to be painted of a more or less homogeneous ethnic group. Here lies an imminent danger for the future of the German-speaking community of Belgium, namely that of progressive assimilation into the dominant French culture of the country.

Alsace, for centuries a disputed border country between France and Germany, today is politically firmly integrated into the French state and the cultural assimilation of its population, which is of Germanic origin, has progressed very far. This becomes obvious from the degree to which the French language has spread in Alsace and the knowledge of German and/or the Alsatian dialect have declined: while there are only very few older people left who do not speak any French at all, the interest among the younger generation in the dialect is declining steadily. European integration has advantaged Alsace not only economically, but also in terms of the confidence Alsatians have in their place in France and Europe. Under these conditions political integration combined with partial cultural assimilation have proved to be successful

policies for the management of ethno-cultural differences that had escalated in the inter-war period. Nevertheless, there still exists a distinct regional identity based on the cultural and linguistic traditions of the historical Alsace, but also on the development the region has taken after 1945. Franco-German reconciliation and the process of European integration have had a significant impact on the development in Alsace. With Germany no longer perceived as a threat, the perspective of a local Alsatian culture based on Alemannic traditions was no longer interpreted as a threat to French territorial sovereignty either. Nevertheless, there is only minimal institutional support for German, yet the decline in the number of German-speakers after the Second World War simultaneously suggests little demand for such support. The local dialect, however, enjoys a significantly higher economic, social, and language status. Given that it is one of the primary focal points of an Alsatian identity that is distinct from both Germany and France, Broadbridge has concluded that the future of the Alsatians as a distinct ethno-cultural/ethno-linguistic group looks more promising. Their prospects of preserving and developing their identity seem better than that of German-speakers in Belgium, and in this the situation in Alsace resembles in some aspects that of the German minority in Denmark.

Although historically it has suffered the most of all ethnic German populations in Western Europe, the German-speaking minority in South Tyrol is today the best-protected and most empowered of all of them. As a result of complex internal and external developments after 1945, Italy's German minority enjoys an extensive set of rights and liberties within a specially crafted regional and provincial framework of autonomy that grants the minority full self-government. While this rather ideal political situation permits the comprehensive protection and development of the minority's ethno-cultural identity, it is not without problems for the future of the

minority. Since the early 1970s, cultural policy, including schools and education, has been the responsibility of each language group. Since then, the SVP has pursued a course of strict segregation which has manifested itself in policy guidelines (cf. Alcock 1982: 63-64), which attempt to preserve German cultural hegemony. This policy has not only had a certain alienating effect on the Italian (and Ladin) population in the province, but has also led to the increasing cultural isolation of the German-speaking population itself. Clearly, among the younger generation of German-speaking South Tyrolese, who lack the personal experience of fascism and the early post-war period, the need for ethnic segregation is felt less strongly and traditional South Tyrolese identification patterns are increasingly being rejected. Many of the older generation, in contrast, have rightly or wrongly preserved their 'victim identity', insisting on the 1972 autonomy statute and its regulations as some form of compensation for the injustices that were inflicted on them. The particular fear of the older South Tyrolese generation in terms of the emergence of a new South Tyrolese identity, equally shared by all ethnic groups, can only be understood by imagining the consequences of such a process, namely the disappearance of ethnic borderlines in politics and society and the feared decline of the ancient South Tyrolese system of traditions, norms, and values which they had fought to preserve over the decades. It is in this context of a continued power struggle, as Schweigkofler has explained, that the success of ethnocentric German parties at recent elections becomes more understandable. Their importance could grow and they might attract a larger share of the vote, even among the younger generation, if the Italian population continues its present trend towards nationalist politics, and if political and economic difficulties occur in the future and which are interpreted along ethnopolitical lines. From this point of view, the failure to establish an ethnically neutral civic identity in

South Tyrol might prove to have severe repercussions for the future, simply because the German minority in Italy has not yet been able to take a similar step towards an identity that incorporates more than just one particular ethno-cultural dimension, thereby becoming less exclusive, similar to post-war developments in Denmark and France.

The essence of the problem of integration is expressed in the continuous difficulty of maintaining a careful balance between what Wolfgang Bergem has initially described as the dichotomy between assimilation and segregation. At least for Western Europe, the resolution of the dilemma may be to adopt an approach that contains a little bit of both.

Between Fear and Hope – Ethnic Germans in Central and Eastern Europe

For more than four decades after the end of the Second World War, the situation of German minorities in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has been fundamentally different from that of the ethnic German communities in Western Europe. Subjected to deportation, forced labour, detention, and expulsion in the immediate aftermath of the war, their ability to preserve, let alone express or develop, their ethno-cultural identity was severely limited under the communist regimes of their host-countries. With the exception of Romania, members of all these minorities were subjected to various assimilation pressures ranging from the simple denial of their existence as a distinct minority group (in Poland) to the repression of their cultural, linguistic, and religious identities. Apart from the intentional neglect of the conditions necessary for minorities in general to preserve their identities, ethnic Germans suffered additionally from the fact that it was their kin-state that had, very often with their active support, inflicted enormous suffering on the population of their

host-states. Being German in Central and Eastern Europe was thus not only unpopular, but almost invited discrimination and persecution. Added to this internal pressure, the increasing opportunities over the years to use the provisions of Article 116 of the Federal Republic's Basic Law accelerated the degree of assimilation, as the most consciously German members of the minority normally emigrated.

The democratisation process that began in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s opened up not only opportunities for the consolidation of German minorities in their host-countries, but also took away all barriers to emigration previously imposed by the communist systems in these countries. Thus, until the changes in German immigration legislation in the early 1990s, a mass exodus of ethnic Germans, particularly from Romania, Poland, and the former Soviet Union, continued to weaken, if not partially destroy, the community structures of German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. Parallel to raising the obstacles to immigration to Germany, the federal government has, since the late 1980s and particularly after 1990, taken many steps to support ethnic Germans in their host countries. This has encompassed the conclusion of bilateral treaties with most of the Central and East European states in which significant German minorities live. These treaties and similar agreements now provide the basis upon which substantial material and financial aid is channelled to German minority communities all across Central and Eastern Europe. Even though this has not necessarily stopped, let alone reversed, the assimilation process, it has at least made a contribution to slowing it down.

Whether this change in the situation will only be a temporary interlude on the way to the ultimate decline of German culture in the region, or whether it will be turned into an opportunity for a fresh start, does not only depend on the continuation of German government support for the minorities or on the persistently democratic and tolerant

environment in the host-states. It also depends on the minorities themselves – whether they want to, and can, seize this opportunity or whether they will perceive their only choice to be between emigration and assimilation.

Even though it is not possible to predict the outcome of the current developments conclusively, a more detailed examination of the contextual situation in which each of the German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe lives today will permit some cautious remarks about the future of ‘German culture in the East’.³

Apart from the minorities explicitly discussed in the previous chapters, ethnic Germans also live in the three Baltic Republics, in Ukraine, in the four Central Asian successor states of the former Soviet Union, and in Georgia.⁴ The numerically smallest groups live in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In terms of their origin, they come from diverse backgrounds, comprising remaining members of the historic German population in the Baltics, some several thousand Memel Germans, and ethnic Germans from Russia who migrated to the Baltic Republics in the Soviet era. The latter group faces severe difficulties to obtain citizenship rights in Estonia and Latvia. This, however, is not a specifically anti-German policy by the governments of these two countries, but a consequence of the discriminatory citizenship policy, which is primarily aimed at the sizeable non-indigenous Russian population. In Georgia, a similarly small group of only some two thousand ethnic Germans is still resident. Apart from their larger size, the single most significant difference between the German minorities in the Baltics and in Georgia, on the one hand, and those in Central Asia, on the other, is the fact that most ethnic Germans from Kazakhstan (almost 700,000), Kyrgyzstan (about 60,000), Tajikistan (around 30,000), and Uzbekistan

³ I have borrowed this phrase from a German government programme started in the mid eighties that uses the term *deutsche Kultur des Ostens*.

⁴ All following figures are 1993 estimates of the German government. Cf. *Bundestagsdrucksache* 12/6162, pp. 36f.

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(approximately 40,000)³ have resolved to leave their host-states, because they are denied the essential conditions to preserve their identity or feel discriminated against because of their previously close affiliation with ethnic Russians or because of their Christian rather than Muslim religion. Another reason, particularly in Tajikistan, is the ongoing civil war. Their existence in these newly independent states resulted mostly from deportation from the European parts of the Soviet Union after the beginning of the war with Germany in 1941. Only in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan had there been settlements since the nineteenth century. Even though the favoured destination of most émigrés remains Germany, a growing number of them settle temporarily or permanently in ethnic German settlements in Russia, especially in the two German rayons in Western Siberia. A survey among ethnic Germans in Kyrgyzstan in 1993 found 85 percent of them determined to emigrate, their preferred destinations being Germany (80 percent), Russia (6 percent), and Ukraine and other CIS states (1 percent) (Eisfeld 1993: 49).

In all these countries on the territory of the former Soviet Union, with the notable exception of Ukraine, where, supported by the German federal government and within the framework of a 1996 agreement between the two countries, the 40,000 strong German minority in Ukraine is seeking to restore its traditional settlement areas, the future for the continued existence of a German minority is rather bleak. Either the degree of assimilation has already progressed irreversibly or the conditions for a sustained recovery of the minority, including the rebuilding of viable community structures, are simply not there because of a lack of government commitment to promote minority rights, insufficient support from Germany, popular resentment against ethnic Germans, or the small number of the remaining members of the minority group. There is, however, a slim chance that the situation in Kazakhstan will

change for the better. For a start, the minority there is much bigger and makes up about 6 percent of the total population of the country. Its age structure is intact and community structures are generally functioning. Even more importantly, there is an effort on the part of the Kazakh government to provide for conditions that would make it possible for members of the minority to remain in the country and be able to express, preserve, and develop their distinct ethno-cultural identity. The Kazakh Decree on Independence declared equal rights of all citizens regardless of their ethnic and/or linguistic origin to be one of the basic principles by which the country's future policy would be guided. Since the German minority as a whole is valued for its professional and labour skills, and the mass emigration of the early 1990s has left its negative mark on the economy, ethnic Germans are encouraged to stay in the country. Support from Germany has been forthcoming, and an inter-governmental conference, including minority representatives, has been in operation since 1992. By 1997, some moderate success in slowing down emigration had been achieved. Nevertheless, severe problems remain. One is the degree of Russification of the minority that had already progressed very far before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is unlikely to be changed in the near future as part of the internal migration pattern of ethnic Germans is their increasing urbanisation, i.e., a move away from the relatively secluded rural environment in which the development of functioning community structures would have been somewhat easier. Another is that the economic situation in the country as a whole has been consistently bad since the early 1990s, resulting in an overall double-figure decline in industrial and agricultural output (Eisfeld 1993: 47).

The future prospects of the minorities in the Central European countries that have been discussed in greater detail above, i.e., the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia, are again diverse. Leaving aside the political uncertainties

of the Yugoslav case, where the minority numbers only a few thousand, the external and internal conditions for the minorities in the other three countries are very different. They are probably best in Hungary, where more than 200,000 ethnic Germans find advantageous political conditions within a model framework of minority legislation. They are fairly well integrated into Hungarian society and have widely preserved or recently revitalised their ethno-cultural identity, even though to differing degrees depending on the precise circumstances of each section of the German community. The political stability of Hungary and the country's success in the transformation of the economy certainly contributed to this process. Nelde has shown that, from a linguistic point of view, a number of problems remain unresolved. Yet as Stevenson has demonstrated, the prospects for the German community to address these issues successfully in the future are relatively good, simply because of the favourable overall situation in which the German minority in Hungary finds itself today.

While it is linguistically probably the best developed of all Eastern and Central European German minorities, the future of the German-speaking population in Romania is far from certain. This is all the more astonishing given the external conditions in which ethnic Germans in Romania live. Supported by the German government and the *Landsmannschaften*, the minority is no longer subjected to any significant level of discrimination. Rather, the Romanian government has long recognised the 'value' of its German population in order to attract foreign investment and to establish mutually beneficial bilateral relationships with Germany, and through it with NATO and the European Union. Also, the German minority in Romania was the only one of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe that had not been subjected to aggressive assimilation. Exclusive German settlements in which German was the

everyday language of conversation existed throughout the post-war period. Thus, the reason for the limited prospects for the future must be sought within the minority.

Wagner has explained that the mass exodus of the late 1980s and early 1990s has not only considerably diminished the size of the minority, it has also rendered vital community structures dysfunctional and disrupted the formerly compact settlement pattern. In addition, the fact that primarily the young and well-educated members of the community emigrated left an over-aged population behind that is no longer represented in all strata of society. It is doubtful whether this process can be reversed and the community, even on a smaller scale, be reconstructed.

Stevenson has also concluded that, for different reasons, the situation of ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic is similarly difficult and their future even more in question than that of the German minority in Hungary. Despite wide-ranging constitutional guarantees for the protection of national minorities, historical developments have complicated the relationship between the Czechs and their German minority. The part the minority played in the dismemberment and subsequent destruction of Czechoslovakia poisoned the relationships with the host-nation for decades to come and prepared the ground for the post-war persecution and partial expulsion of the minority. This in turn has created a resentful diaspora community in Germany that has tried over the years to exert influence on the bilateral relationships between Germany and Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic. Successive governments of the country, therefore, have been very reluctant to make concessions on issues relating to the status of the German minority and to rights demanded by the diaspora community, such as a right to residence. The German and Czech governments have only recently managed to find and express their consensus in a joint declaration, which might prove to be the beginning of reconciliation, not just at the bilateral level

but also between two communities which have both incurred tremendous suffering.

Without such reconciliation it will not be possible to secure a future for the German minority in the Czech Republic.

This, Cordell has stated, has been accomplished in relation to Poland and the German minority living there. Territorially concentrated in the Upper Silesian region, the minority's relationship with the majority population or state authorities in Poland is no longer threatened by either assimilation or repression or by irredentist or secessionist aspirations. Favourable political conditions, providing guaranteed parliamentary representation and opportunities for the minority to organise itself in political parties and cultural associations, have enabled ethnic Germans to maintain viable community structures and preserve, develop, and express their ethno-cultural identity despite the exodus of members of the minority that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Over the past years, the German minority has successfully striven to become a bridge between Poland and Germany. This success has been possible because the German federal government has placed great emphasis on its relationship with Poland, while the Polish government has recognised the 'value' of the German minority as a catalyst of reconciliation and eventually of accession to NATO and the European Union. From this perspective, ethnic Germans in Poland can confidently look towards the future.

Stricker's analysis has revealed that the most complex situation has evolved in relation to ethnic Germans living in the Russian Federation. Deportation and decades of repression and finally emigration have resulted in the steady decline of the minority and its increasing assimilation. This process continues despite increasing efforts by the German government to improve the living conditions of the minority in Russia. Aid programmes in the areas of German language education, economic recovery, and

culture have been put in place to slow down the process of assimilation and emigration. The success of these programmes will depend on the will of the minority to consolidate itself and survive ultimately as a distinct ethno-cultural group. In addition, the situation in Russia as a whole will have a great bearing on whether ethnic Germans will see their future in Russia or in Germany.

The dichotomy of fear and hope, therefore, is to some extent a condensation of the past, present, and future of German minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. Deportation, expulsion, repression, persecution, and assimilation stand not only for the past. The resurgence of ethno-nationalism in most countries hosting German minorities, even if they themselves may not necessarily always be its target, can diminish the little bit of hope that developed after the collapse of the communist regimes and the opening up of the societies in the region. With respect to the future, fear and hope symbolise assimilation and minority protection just as much as they exemplify the choice many members of ethnic German communities, particularly on the territory of the former Soviet Union, have to make between remaining in their host-countries and emigrating to the Federal Republic. Thus, what is similar for all German-speaking minorities in Central and Eastern Europe is the fact that, although the conditions under which their members live have generally improved over the last decade, their survival as distinct ethno-cultural communities is by no means certain.

Assessing the Current Status and Future Prospects of German Minorities

Even though the situations in which the German-speaking minorities in Europe live are different, the factors that determine their status at present, and thus influence their future, are essentially the same. They can be grouped into three categories – intra-minority conditions, the situation in the host-country, and the state of bilateral

relationships between the host-country and the Federal Republic of Germany, or Austria in the case of South Tyrol and, to a lesser degree, Hungary.

Among the intra-minority conditions, the most important aspects are demographic in their nature or relate to the degree of assimilation. The size of the minority, whether it lives territorially concentrated or dispersed, in its traditional settlement areas or in areas to which it had been deported at some point, and the age and social structure of the minority community influence its vitality as a distinct ethno-cultural group, and thus determine its future chances of survival or complete linguistic and cultural assimilation. The degree of political and social integration characterises to what extent the minority has been accepted as an equal part into its host-society.

Integration is thus linked closely to the general situation in the host-country. Three dimensions are essential in this respect – the degree to which minorities and their rights are explicitly protected in constitutional and simple legislation, the commitment with which ethno-cultural distinctiveness is recognised and supported, and the way in which popular and government sentiments influence the implementation of legal directives.

In terms of the bilateral aspect, historic and contemporary issues are important, as they both influence the considerations of the minority and its host and kin-states in relation to each other. The existence of a bilateral treaty including provisions related to the minority group, its right to engage in cross-border cooperation and to receive formal support from the German government as well as the emigrant community are the three most important factors in this context that will contribute to how the particular minority community locates itself both in relation to its host-state as well as to its kin-nation.

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In view of the wide variety of geographic, social, political, and cultural contexts in which German-speaking minorities find themselves today, no generalisation is possible as to which of the above dimensions are the most significant and how each individual aspect must be shaped in order to facilitate the well-being of the different German communities in Western as well as Central and Eastern Europe. The following table, therefore, can only provide a case-specific assessment of their present situation and cautiously assess their future prospects.

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Bundestagsdrucksache 12/6162.

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