

ISSUES REGARDING THE LEGAL RECOGNITION OF REGIONAL LANGUAGES

Prof. Dr. habil. Janusz Sługocki

University of Szczecin, Poland
e-mail: janusz.slugocki@usz.edu.pl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4018-409X>

Abstract. The article explores difficulties in acquiring the legal status of a regional language in the light of the principles of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language. Regional language is a new element in the European language policy. The term “regional language”, however, has proved useful, albeit controversial and also conflictive. To date, only Kashubian has been granted the status of a regional language in Poland, despite numerous initiatives and efforts by the Silesian and Wilamowice communities. The reasons for the denial of legal status lie in the long-lasting dispute over the concept of language and dialect. The debate over traditional and new paradigms in linguistics, including ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics, has proved to be important in resolving this issue.

Keywords: regional language; European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; protection of Polish language; Silesia.

INTRODUCTION

Regulations on the protection of the Polish language are primarily contained in the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland,¹ as well as in ordinary legislation. According to Article 27 Polish shall be the official language in the Republic of Poland. However this provision shall not infringe upon national minority rights resulting from ratified international agreements. Poland shall ensure Polish citizens belonging to national or ethnic minorities the freedom to maintain and develop their own language, to maintain customs and traditions, and to develop their own culture (Article 35).

The preamble of the Act of 7 October 1999 on the Polish language² emphasises the importance of the Polish language for national identity and culture, and the protection of these values is considered to be the duty of

¹ Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2nd April 1997, Journal of Laws No. 78, item 483 as amended.

² Act of 7 October 1999 on the Polish Language, Journal of Laws of 2021, item 672 as amended.

citizens and of all bodies, public institutions and organisations participating in public life. The provisions of the Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language³ are particularly important in relation to the above. In practice, there were difficulties in recognizing the legal status of a regional language. So far only Kashubian has been granted the status of a regional language in Poland. The debate over, in particular, traditional and new paradigms in linguistics, including ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics, has proved to be important in resolving this issue. In the author's opinion the literature in administrative law does not pay enough attention to this problem although this issue should be the subject of scientific discussion.

1. EUROPEAN CHARTER FOR REGIONAL OR MINORITY LANGUAGES

The basic international legal regulation on regional languages is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages,⁴ drawn up in Strasbourg on 5 November 1992, adopted and ratified by Poland in 2009.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is generally viewed positively, as it is "a document that speaks to the cultural richness of each state, and not a tool for cultural and linguistic impoverishment of the states that ratify it" [Tambor 2011, 1]. The Act was intended to reaffirm that regional and minority languages are "recognized as a crucial value" [Sagan-Bielawa 2016, 7]. It has been emphasized that it is a consequential document, both for individual European citizens and the signatory states, although it has flaws, of which the most serious is the use of vague terminology [Bill 2011, 1].

There are fewer than 300 languages in Europe, and only about 80 of these have official status. It is estimated that around 10% of Europe's population uses minority or regional languages, of which as many as a hundred are seriously endangered [Dołowy-Rybińska 2015, 3].

Originally, the term „lesser-used languages” was used alongside references to endangered indigenous or historical languages. The forerunner of efforts to improve the recognition of these languages was the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL), a non-governmental organization established in 1982 to support and promote linguistic diversity in Europe. The organization was active until 2010 and at that time cooperated with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe.

³ Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language, Journal of Laws 2017, item 823.

⁴ European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, drafted in Strasbourg on 5 November 1992, Journal of Laws 2009, No. 137, item 1121.

The organization's primary focus was to support and bring together communities using languages at risk. It is worth pointing out that the original term "lesser-used languages", which was rather long and therefore cumbersome, was much more accurate in capturing the essence of the object of protection. It was subsequently replaced by the term "regional or minority languages". The linguistic literature points out that regional languages are a new element in European language policy [Wicherkiewicz 2011, 71-78; Idem 2019, 17-28].

In consequence, the European Charter of Languages may include all languages that are not recognized as official languages in a particular country. This is why a language as widely-spoken as Catalan in Spain was included in the Charter [Dołowy-Rybińska 2015, 6-7]. Hence, the Charter may apply to linguistic communities of several million, as well as to small ones numbering in the thousands or even hundreds [Sagan-Bielawa 2016, 7].

Not only has the term "regional language" proved controversial, but also sparking major disputes. This is particularly the case in Poland, where "regional language", largely due to the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, is being seen as a respectable, prestigious term in contrast to dialects, which have suddenly become synonymous with underdeveloped local language variations.

From the point of view of language endangerment, three factors stand out as important. The first is intergenerational transmission of language, that is, its transmission from parents to their children. The second factor is the recognition of the language in the territory where it is spoken and an active policy to support its development, which in turn is important for the prestige of the language concerned. The third factor is the size of the language community concerned [Dołowy-Rybińska 2015, 3].

Poland has declared its intention to apply the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in accordance with the provisions of the Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language. According to the Government Statement of 22 May 2009 on the binding force of the European Charter,⁵ only Kashubian has been granted the status of a regional language. According to the official report: "For decades, Kashubian has not been recognised as a separate language, but only as a dialect of the Polish language. The written form of the Kashubian language in use today is an evolution of the form proposed in 1879 by Florian Ceynowa, in 'Zarés do Grammatikj Kašëbsko-Słowjnskjè Mòwé', published in Poznan."⁶

⁵ Government Statement of 22 May 2009 on the binding force of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages drafted in Strasbourg on 5 November 1992, Journal of Laws 2009, No. 137, item 1122.

⁶ See *VIII Raport dotyczący sytuacji mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych oraz języka regionalnego w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w latach 2019-2020*, Warszawa 2022, p. 69.

The European Charter does not provide a definition of the term “national minorities”, nor of “minority languages” or “regional languages”. As indicated in literature, this is due to the disparate situation of minority groups in Europe and their functioning, hence no single definition satisfactory to all parties has been arrived at [Dołowy-Rybińska 2015, 6]. Similarly, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities⁷ does not contain a definition of “national minority” since, among the representatives of the states participating in the negotiation of the text of the Convention, there was no agreement on a single, common definition and concept of national minorities.

Under the European Charter, regional or minority languages are defined as languages which are traditionally spoken in a specific territory of a state by citizens of that state who make up a group smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state and which differ from the official language(s) of that state.

The Preamble defines the objectives of the Charter and how it operates. In particular, it points out that the preservation of Europe’s historic regional or minority languages, some of which are in danger of complete extinction, contributes to the safeguarding and development of Europe’s cultural richness and traditions. The right to use a regional or minority language in private and public life was recognised as an inalienable right in accordance with the principles of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights⁸ (Article 27 mandates the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minority to enjoy their own culture, to profess their own religion, and to use their own language) and in the spirit of the Council of Europe’s Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The Charter emphasizes the value of multiculturalism and multilingualism, and recognises that the protection of and support for regional or minority languages should not happen to the detriment of official languages and the need to learn them. The protection and promotion of regional or minority languages in the various countries and regions of Europe is recognised as an important contribution to building a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity, within a framework of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The measures taken should also consider the specific conditions and historical traditions of the various regions of European countries.

Part Two of the Charter lists nine main objectives and principles on which individual States ought to base the standards for the protection

⁷ The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities drafted in Strasbourg on 1 February 1995, *Journal of Laws* No. 22, item 209.

⁸ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, *Journal of Laws* 1977, No. 38, item 168.

(policy, legislation and practice) of their languages. These principles include, i.a., recognition of regional or minority languages as an expression of cultural richness, the need to take strong action to promote regional or minority languages for their protection, the need to facilitate or encourage the use of regional or minority languages in speech and writing, in public and private life, to provide appropriate forms and means for the teaching and learning of regional or minority languages at all appropriate levels, and finally, to promote the study and research of regional or minority languages in universities or similar scientific institutions.

The specific commitments of the signatory states are incorporated in Part Three by identifying and designating the areas and principles in which their regional or minority languages should be supported. Each area contains a number of sub-areas – options – from which each state selects, for each of the designated languages, the obligations it will be able to fulfil. The areas indicated in the Charter are: education; judicial authorities; administrative authorities and public services; media; cultural activities and cultural objects; economic and social life; cross-border exchanges [Dołowy-Rybińska 2015, 37; Bill 2011, 1].

2. ACT OF 6 JANUARY 2005

The scope of its regulation stipulated in Article 1 of the Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language includes matters related to the preservation and development of the cultural identity of national and ethnic minorities, the preservation and development of the regional language, the civic and social integration of persons belonging to national and ethnic minorities, as well as the manner of implementing the principle of equal treatment of persons irrespective of their ethnic origin. It also defines the tasks and competences of government administration bodies and local government units within the scope of these matters.

From the outset, the Act evoked many conflicting emotions [Malicka 2017, 55-78]. It is highlighted in the literature that it took more than twenty years to work on the approved wording of the Act, and that “the numerous controversies that the consecutive drafts generated are symptomatic of the approach of state authorities and social organizations to the issue of national minorities living on the territory of Poland” [ibid., 56]. The issue that aroused the most controversy during the work on the law was the protection of the regional language. The early version of the draft law⁹ (Draft Law on National

⁹ Draft Law on National and Ethnic Minorities in the Republic of Poland of 11 January 2002, Sejm, 4th term, Sejm print No. 223.

and Ethnic Minorities, print no. 223) did not provide any regulation of the regional language at all and did not specify its definition [Kurzępa 2019, 39].

In the law that was finally passed, Chapter 4 – Regional Language contained a few provisions referring to the regional language, though other articles of the Law, provided for minority languages, also apply to the subject issue (in.a. Articles 7-15).

The way regional language, the subject of this statutory regulation also included in the regulation's title, was described should be critically appraised. In Article 19 of the Act, instead of providing a definition of regional language, the legislator simply lists its various characteristics and does so in a defective manner.

The Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language, stipulates in Article 19(1) that a “regional language within the meaning of the Act, in accordance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages”, is considered to be a language that is “traditionally spoken on the territory of a State by its citizens who constitute a numerically smaller group than the rest of the population of that State” and at the same time differs from the official language of that State; the definition does not embrace dialects of the official language of the State or migrant languages. In turn, Article 19(2) of the Act states that Kashubian is a regional language within the meaning of the Act.

Firstly, compliance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is over-declared in the Act. It is emphasized in the literature that the “understanding of the Act” is not unequivocally “compatible” with the European Charter, as this document does not distinguish between “regional” and “minority” languages, hence the definition formulated in the Act has a different meaning in the European Charter, where it refers to virtually all minority indigenous languages [Wicherkiewicz 2011, 74; Idem 2014]. Moreover, the discrepancies in the scope and manner of regulation of the two Acts make it difficult to assess the compatibility of this law with the act which, under the Constitution, takes precedence in application. This assessment, moreover, does not rest with the ordinary legislator, but with the Constitutional Court and other courts, as well as the doctrine.

Secondly, the reference to “the territory of a given state” is dubious as it suggests a reference not only to Poland but also to other states, which is absurd. Similarly, the phrase “by its citizens who constitute a numerically smaller group than the rest of the population of that State” implies residents of Poland other than Polish nationals. Pursuant to the principle of the rationality of the legislator, one would have to make the absurd assumption that the regulation does not apply only to Poland, but also to a foreign state, referring to displaced persons from another state, e.g. Indonesia or Pakistan. Further on, however, the legislator excludes the issue of migrant languages

in this regard. Perhaps, therefore, this construct could be applied to Polish repatriates from Argentina or Kazakhstan, but it is debatable whether such protection makes sense in Poland.

Thirdly, the above-mentioned references to the “criteria of the Act” are overturned by the legislator’s unambiguous conclusion: “The regional language within the meaning of the Act is the Kashubian language”. Such wording suggests a departure from objective criteria, i.e. linguistic analysis of whether Kashubian or any other regional speech (in linguistic terminology: ethnolect) is a language or just a dialect. This also attests to the political nature of the statutory solution.

With regard to the regional language, Article 19 of the Act provides for appropriate application of the provisions of Articles 7 to 15, which regulate the situation of ethnic minority languages, with the reservation that the number of inhabitants of a municipality (indicated in Article 14 as the number of inhabitants of a municipality belonging to a minority) should be understood as the number of speakers of the regional language identified in the last census. In turn, Article 20 of the Act sets out rules for the implementation of the right to learn a regional language or to study in a regional language, as well as obligations of public authorities in this respect. The right of speakers of a regional language to learn or receive education in that language is implemented following the principles and the procedure laid down in the Act of 7 September 1991 on the Educational System.¹⁰ Public authorities are obliged to take appropriate measures to support activities aimed at preserving and developing the regional language [Hauser and Szustkiewicz 2019, 24-25]. Important is also the right enables the use of a minority language in contacts with the municipal authority, although it will only be an auxiliary language, used in addition to and not instead of Polish [ibid., 30-34]. Measures may also include funds transferred from the budget of the local authority to organizations or institutions engaged in the preservation and development of the regional language.

3. RECOGNITION OR GRANTING THE STATUS OF A REGIONAL LANGUAGE

The status of a regional language has been granted only to Kashubian, despite numerous initiatives and efforts made by the Silesian and Wilamowice communities.

With regard to the last initiative taken by the Silesian community, the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, on the basis of Article

¹⁰ Act of 7 September 1991 on the Educational System, Journal of Laws 2016, item 1943 as amended.

122(5) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997, refused to sign the Act of 26 April 2024 amending the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language and certain other acts, eventually referring the Act to the Sejm for reconsideration on 29 May 2024.¹¹

There are numerous doubts regarding this issue. The basic concern boils down to the question: Is it a matter of recognising a regional language on the basis of criteria which may or may not be objectively fulfilled, or is it, in fact, a matter of granting the status of a regional language driven by unclear political motives?

So far no consensus has been reached in the course of legislative efforts undertaken by various sides of the political scene in Poland. In principle, regional languages have been denied legal recognition on the grounds of various “substantive” arguments. However, have uniform and precise criteria for the recognition of a language variety (ethnolect) as a regional language been developed in this process?

Refusal to recognise the legal status of a regional language has for years been rooted in a dispute over the concepts of language and dialect. The dispute over traditional and new paradigms in linguistics in particular, including ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics, has proved important in resolving this issue.

While it is generally accepted that regional languages are those that belong to the same family as the state language and that the group speaking them does not have a fully developed, distinct national identity other than the dominant national identity [Dołowy-Rybińska 2015, 6-7], the term itself is used imprecisely in sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics and in classifications and typologies of languages [Wicherkiwicz 2011, 73].

The European Charter covers neither the dialects of the official language of the state nor the languages of immigrants. The 2005 Act does likewise. The legislator thus appears to refer to the common language and the commonly accepted findings of linguists. However, linguists point out that neither of these two pieces of legislation “clarifies and defines the concept of dialect or the concept of regional language or language in general” [Tambor 2011, 2].

The opinion of the Council of the Polish Language at the Presidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences of 20 May 2011, drawn up for the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration, is cited to this day as evidence of an unequivocal linguistic assessment, or more precisely, assessment dictated by traditional linguistic paradigm. This opinion included a statement claiming that “the speech of native inhabitants of Silesia was and is considered by probably all Polish linguists to be a dialect of the Polish language,

¹¹ President of the Republic of Poland 2024, Legislative Veto to the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities, Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland.

encompassing many different dialects,”¹² from which some politicians, e.g. President Andrzej Duda in 2024, drew a conclusion that it “does not meet the formal conditions” of the aforementioned Convention and Act.

Elsewhere in this opinion, the Council of the Polish Language (CPL) opined that: “the status of the language spoken by Silesians should depend on how it is treated by Silesians themselves, but also on how it is perceived by users of the Polish language.”¹³ A significant change in the Council’s position is also worth noting. At the meeting on 1 June 2021, the CPL’s Presidium reminded that “the Council of the Polish Language is authorized only to provide opinions or, alternatively, share its position on a linguistic matter, but it is not within its competence, as defined in the ‘Act of 31 October 1999 on the Polish language’, to make judgements on any issues (apart from matters of spelling and punctuation), especially those concerning sociolinguistic issues.”¹⁴

However, linguistic literature stresses that it is not possible to make a precise distinction between language and dialect, as there are no clearcut definitions that would allow to distinguish between the two concepts with the help of linguistic tools. This is particularly true of the concept of “regional language” as defined by the European Charter and the 2005 Act, since these are legal concepts, including the so-called “auxiliary language”, created and popularized precisely by these Acts. The notion of “regional language” has no equivalent in linguistic terminology, “is not a linguistic category and is not a linguistic concept”. No objective criteria or tools have been developed to distinguish a language from a dialect [Tambor 2024, 8].

A term used extensively today is “ethnolect” understood as the language spoken by a particular social group. The term comes in handy as “it carries no secondary connotations, contrary to such terms as ‘language’ and ‘dialect’” [Wyderka 2011, 4].

The notion of regional language is a “legal-political category” and therefore “linguistic knowledge is not fully applicable to it. Linguists and their statements play merely an auxiliary function” [Tambor 2011, 1]. Similarly, in 2012 in the Sejm (the lower chamber of the Polish parliament), the author of the bill granting Silesian the status of a regional language emphasized that “a regional language is a socio-legal concept and not a linguistic one” and that the proposed amendment to the law specifically concerns “extending the status of a regional language to embrace the Silesian ethnolect. It is a matter of formally registering the Silesian language as a second regional

¹² See <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/100941> [accessed: 01.06.2024], p. 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Communiqué of the Presidium of the Republic of Poland of 2021, Communiqué of the Presidium of the Council for the Polish Language of 1 June 2021 on the language spoken by inhabitants of Wilamowice, <https://rjp.pan.pl/dokumenty-rady?view=article&id=2031:wilamowice&catid=52:komunikaty-rady-jzyka-polskiego> [accessed: 01.06.2024].

language alongside Kashubian, which currently enjoys legal protection and state support” [Plura 2012, 4]. On the basis of sociolinguistic criteria, the contemporary Silesian language is treated as an independent literary language that has emerged in the last two decades from the Silesian dialect of Polish. The following conditions are considered sufficient for the recognition of a separate Silesian language: the existence of a wide range of users who treat their regional ethnolect as an independent linguistic code; the functioning of literary Silesian in the public sphere; the existence of Silesian writing that is diverse in form, theme and style; and advanced work on codification [Jaroszewicz 2022, 77].

The largest global linguistic endeavor is the US-based *Ethnologue*, which has been published regularly since 1951 and is an updated catalog of all the world’s languages. The *Ethnologue* is also currently the most widely used classification standard for over 7,000 of the world’s natural languages [Cornwell 2019, 1]. The latest 27th edition provides another updated overview of the world’s languages. There, Silesian is presented as the native language of Poland, i.e. the Polish state, and although it is not supported by public institutions, it is still the standard language used at home and in the local community [Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2024].

The concept of regional language as a language policy term has thus become a point of reference for numerous regional and local communities [cf. Kijonka 2016]. The literature points out that “for the wellbeing of the people living in Silesia, the recognition of the Silesian language(s) as a regional language is of colossal importance. Marginalized in the German state, forcibly repolonized in the Polish state, they can finally gain a sense of dignity and communal identity that is respected” [Szmeja 2011, 1].

Language is considered to be one of the most important factors for the expression of community in today’s world [Tambor 2014, 39] and an essential element in the formation of regional identity [Synak 1993, 114-26].

In 2008, it was pointed out in the literature that “the most significant criterion from the point of view of a democratic law-based state is, undoubtedly, the fact that more than 56,000 Polish citizens have declared Silesian as their language of choice spoken at home. In the context of such a big number of speakers it is indeed regrettable that the administrative authorities, institutions or experts responsible for Polish language policy regarding regional or minority languages are not ready to engage in a dialogue. Over 50 thousand declarations of Polish citizens are simply being ignored ...” [Wicherkiewicz 2008, 1]. This view is still valid, but it referred to the 2002 census, whereas in the most recent census in 2021 the number increased tenfold, reflecting not an improved situation of the Silesian language, but rather the strengthening of regional identity.

CONCLUSIONS

The regulations on regional languages in the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Languages of 6 January 2005 emerged at the last stage of the legislative process and contain a number of legislative shortcomings. The Polish Act, almost twenty years old, refers to Poland as “the territory of a given state” and to Poles as citizens of “that state”. This wording should clearly be corrected.

The more serious, practical consequences relate to the fact that the term “regional language”, as used in the Act, has proved useful, albeit controversial and also conflictive. The relationship between language and region is becoming increasingly more important. The regional movement in Silesia has evolved into a “regional issue”, acquiring a political character. It was born from the sense of injustice, unfulfilled aspirations and unmet needs experienced by the community [Rusek 2015, 121-33; Jałowiecki 2000, 282-84]. The frustration, fueled by the non-recognition of the Silesian language, can be felt in Silesia, yet any change for the better may be a matter of the distant future [Rusek 2015, 131]. Absence of systemic solutions regarding language varieties (ethnolects) in Poland is palpable.

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