

The Maintenance of Lower Sorbian in Brandenburg (Germany)

Germany's present population of almost 81 million includes about 60,000 Sorbs, who enjoy the status of a national minority. 20,000 of them live in the state of Brandenburg and are known as the Lower Sorbs. The number of individuals able to speak Lower Sorbian is estimated to be around 7,000. This means that the traditional language of this group is extremely endangered. The main reason for this situation is centuries of unfavourable policies. They range from a simple lack of support to measures that were explicitly designed to disrupt language maintenance, such as prohibitions on the use of the language, the burning of books and the removal of teachers and priests from the Sorbian-speaking region of Lusatia to German-speaking areas. Sorbian-German language shift was accelerated by the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. Another major factor was, and still is, the demolition of Sorbian villages for the purpose of large-scale coal mining.

State support for Sorbian culture was at its highest during the period of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, 1949-1989), but GDR governments inhibited the expression of Sorbian identities in an ethnic and national sense. All of the Sorbian institutions we have today were established during that period. However, most of them are located in the Upper Sorbian region, which resulted in Bautzen (in the state of Saxony) becoming the centre of Sorbian culture, politics and administration. Cottbus (Brandenburg) and the Lower Sorbs played a rather peripheral role. It was only as a result of the political changes of 1989/90 that the Lower Sorbs were able to set out a programme of measures that is more local and specific to their needs and allows them to develop the ethnic dimension of their heritage and identity.

Lower Lusatia is now home to a whole range of Sorbian activities and to a rich cultural life more generally. It has seen the resumption of regular church services in Lower Sorbian and, most importantly, the adoption of a range of relatively robust language policies. They have informed the establishment of the WITAJ ('Welcome') education programme, which extends from the early years stage to the very end of secondary school. The WITAJ team not only coordinates this highly important initiative at the strategic level but also produces a substantial amount of teaching materials,

provides teacher training services and organises supporting events. WITAJ is widely perceived to do more for the survival of the Lower Sorbian language than any other measure. What we are unable to say at this point is whether it will be enough.