
Minority Groups as Socio-Economic Development Factor of the Emerging EU Region in the Opinion of Regional Authorities: Evidence from Poland and the German Minority

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Abstract:

Purpose: This paper aims to show the positive role of the German minority in Poland by considering its influence on socio-economic development.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The novel approach is to find the relationship between the presence of the German minority and the socio-economic regional development in the opinion of local authorities. For this purpose, the survey method was used. The surveys were conducted among the Opole Province local authorities concerning their opinion about the role of the German minority in respect of particular areas of socio-economic development.

Findings: The main achievement of this paper is establishing that the German minority living in Poland, mainly in the Opole Province, has had a remarkable positive impact on several economic, social, cultural, and demographic phenomena, as well as on improving Polish-German relations in the opinion of regional authorities.

Practical Implications: The results of the analysis might be used in shaping an appropriate development policy. They may also indicate the need for appropriate management of minority groups in regional development, and on the other hand, to use ethnic diversity as a potential of the region, a primarily economic one.

Originality/Value: Research results can contribute to theoretical models regarding ethnic groups and local and regional development.

Keywords: Ethnic diversity, socio-economic regional development, German minority, Polish-German relations.

JEL: O5, R110.

Paper Type: Research Paper.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a rising interest in understanding the implications of ethnic diversity. This issue has become of particular importance in globalization processes and international migrations that have been changing modern societies' ethnic structure. Considering ethnic diversity from an economic perspective, it can be assumed that, on the one hand, the ethnic bond has become a driving force for achieving common political, economic, and social goals. On the other hand, the ethnic factor may influence development disproportions.

Basically, national, and ethnic minorities in a specific area can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it is a threat to national integrity and national security maintenance, thus undermining sustainable development. On the other hand, minorities can also be perceived differently as a significant development factor. In the light of the migration crisis, ethnic diversity is considered in the context of a relationship with the social capital (Gesthuizen *et al.*, 2009; Laurence, 2011; Fernando and Pendakur, 2014; Meer and Tolsma, 2014; Thomas, 2014; Chua, 2015; Koopmans and Schaeffer, 2016; Laurence and Bentley, 2016; Laurence, 2017; Ratna *et al.*, 2017; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2020).

2. Literature Review

Bove and Elia (2017) investigated how cultural diversity affects economic growth and whether this relationship depends on developing a country. In this regard, ethnic diversity positively impacts real GDP growth over large time periods, particularly in developing countries.

Ethnic diversity is found to have an impact on trust (Bram and Dronkers, 2011; Ayob, 2018; Painter and Flagg, 2020) and social solidarity (Putnam, 2007; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2010; Noja and Andrei, 2016), as well as on conflict prevention (O'Reilly *et al.*, 1997) on the provision of public goods (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Chakravarty and Fonseca, 2014; Gisselquist, 2016) and the labor market (Oezdemir, 2013; Heath and Martin, 2013; Cheung, 2014; Tonini and Peng, 2018; Noja, 2018).

Ethnic groups can be characterized by their strong regional identification. This is confirmed by observations in relation to the Opole Province and the German minority, distinguished by an exceptional attachment to the region of origin. That means that in a non-discrimination situation, the German minority living in the Opole Province is less willing to leave the region of origin than its other inhabitants (Dolińska *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, this group is characterized by mutual solidarity and economic independence and cooperation, resulting indirectly from the work ethos. Researchers emphasize that among the population of German origin in the areas of the Opole Province, a different attitude towards work has developed than

in the rest of the society, mainly due to the German culture and work patterns and because of technical and civilization innovations taken from Germany (Szmeja, 1997).

Ethnic diversity can influence innovation processes (Kloosterman and Rath, 2001; Kerr, 2008; Lee, 2015). Culturally diverse teams may be better at generating new thinking or problem solving, particularly in knowledge-intensive environments. Through diasporas networks, migrant or minority staff and business owners can access additional upstream and downstream markets, assisting process innovation and commercializing new ideas. 'Ethnic entrepreneurs' are argued to play several critical roles in urban innovation. They are more likely to develop new ideas (Nathan and Lee, 2011).

Akay *et al.* (2017) found a positive effect of ethnic diversity on the well-being of German natives. It turned out that the positive effect of ethnic diversity is stronger for immigrant groups that are culturally and economically closer to Germany. Researchers demonstrated the welfare benefits of greater diversity, highlighting that each region's diversity positively correlated with well-being, but not diversity in different areas.

Ottaviano and Peri's (2006) findings point out that cultural diversity may constitute an important aspect of urban diversity, influencing local production, and consumption. According to this finding cultural diversity has a net positive effect on US-born citizens' productivity because it positively correlates with the average wage received and the average rent paid by US-born individuals.

The study of Alesina and Ferrara (2005) emphasizes both positive and negative effects of ethnic diversity on economic policies and outcomes. The authors of this research show that the potential benefits of ethnic diversity come from the variety in production. The costs come from the inability to agree on common public goods and public policies. The benefits in production from various skills are more likely to be relevant for more advanced societies. Rich democracies are more capable of "handling" productively ethnic diversity. On the other hand, the negative effect of ethnic diversity is significantly mitigated by "good" institutions. That ethnic fragmentation is negatively correlated with infrastructure quality, illiteracy, and school attainment and positively correlated with infant mortality.

Ethnic diversity can positively stimulate the education process, particularly language skills (Maestri, 2017). Ethnically diverse backgrounds provide valuable experience and skills for new educational, community, and workplace settings (Nihina *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, ethnic diversity can benefit students' mental health, intergroup attitudes, and school adaptation (Graham, 2018). Regions inhabited by national and ethnic minorities are characterized by an excellent knowledge of foreign language skills among their inhabitants. Maestri's study proved that ethnic diversity positively impacts the test scores of minority students,

particularly for language skills. Fundamentally ethnic diversity stimulates language proficiency and increases the time students spend studying.

On the other hand, Churchill and Mishra's (2018) research shows that ethnic diversity negatively affects business start-ups' financial capital. Furthermore, results suggest a negative association between ethnic diversity and female borrowers' share recorded by MFIs. Though Mickiewicz *et al.* (2019) considered the effects of ethnic diversity and immigration on entrepreneurship, distinguishing between the individual traits and the environmental characteristics. They assumed that with an increase in ethnic diversity, the likelihood of being engaged in start-up activity decreases then increases.

The presence of national minorities and ethnic groups on a country's territory may principally, especially when some specific, unique features distinguish these groups, constitute a kind of asset for it. Furthermore, a positive impact of ethnicity can be observed as more groups are included in the policy process (Birbir and Waguespack, 2011). Minorities may play a key role in advance of liberty, as they can test the majority's abuse and absolute power (De Soysa and Vadlamannati, 2017). However, it still happens, mainly due to the fear of otherness, that ethnic groups are ignored and discredited (Cashmore, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 2015; Gerring *et al.*, 2018, Gibney, 2020).

3. Research Methods

In Polish conditions, the region in which ethnic and national diversity is most clearly visible is the Opole Province, in which, after the post-war changes in borders, a large concentration of population of German origin remained, not only ethnically different from other inhabitants of Poland but previously remaining in a different cultural and civilizational sphere, distinguished by a different system of values and different behavioral patterns. This kind of citizenship is held by those inhabitants of the Opole region, who have German origin related to the German state within the borders of 1937. The political breakthrough in 1989 caused a huge wave of definitive migration correlated with the so-called late resettlement. The German minority in the Opole Province represents about one-fifth of the province's inhabitants and resides mainly in the Eastern Opole region's rural areas where it has dominated and lived for generations.

Regardless of its ethnic diversity, the Opole Province has been distinguished by the range of other substantial features, such as intensive wage-earning emigration to the West, relatively low level of unemployment, higher than average standard of living, well developed economic and social infrastructures, as well as high levels of urbanization and industrialization, relatively higher prices of some goods and services, and remarkable diversification of the market offer in the sphere of local trade and services (Jończy and Łukaniszyn-Domaszewska, 2018). It appears that all

those features would have been directly related both to people of German origin, living in the Opole region, and the activity of the German minority organizations, that have had a significant impact on the socio-economic diversity of the area and the development of the entire Opole Province.

The empirical area of the analysis was research dedicated to a social assessment of the role of the German minority in the regional development of the Opole Province. To decide in this regard, a questionnaire survey was carried out, which included representatives of the Opole Province's local government. The questionnaires were sent to all 183 local governments of the Opole region, out of which 124 questionnaires were completed and returned, which constituted 68% of the surveyed population. This study aimed to gain knowledge about the opinions and assessments of local authorities about the German minority. The major hypothesis was that local government officials positively assess the role of the German minority as an essential socio-economic development factor.

4. Results

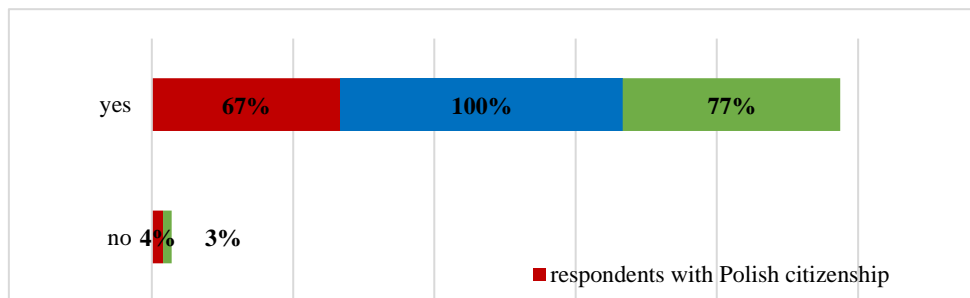
This paper aims to show the social assessment of the role of the German minority in certain areas of socio-economic development. In this respect, respondents assessed the impact of the German minority on the particular areas of regional development, including the general impact on socio-economic development, the influence on the regional policy or cooperation with other organizational groups in the region. The surveyed regional authorities evaluated the promotion of the German minority as a distinguishing factor in the socio-economic development of the region and whether this minority could constitute the region's development potential, and if so, in what areas. Since the surveyed representatives included both persons from the German minority and persons without German origin, it was decided that the respondents would be divided into those two groups. Therefore, presentations and analysis of research results were made by dividing the surveyed local authorities into German origin, who constituted 32% of all respondents and the rest not related to the German minority, 68% of all surveyed authorities.

The first studied problem was whether ethnic diversity positively influences the regional development of the Opole Province in examining regional authorities (Figure 1). When analyzing the surveyed regional authorities' responses, it turned out that the majority confirmed that ethnic diversity could positively affect regional development (77%). Moreover, this thesis was confirmed by all German origin representatives and 67% of respondents with Polish citizenship.

The next question referred to the previous one, but it was already concerned about assessing a specific ethnic group, which is the German minority (Figur 2). It was devoted to the impact of the German minority on the socio-economic regional development of the Opole Province. Respondents assessed this impact positively

(67% of all respondents), although there were differences in respondents' assessments, both related and unrelated to the German minority.

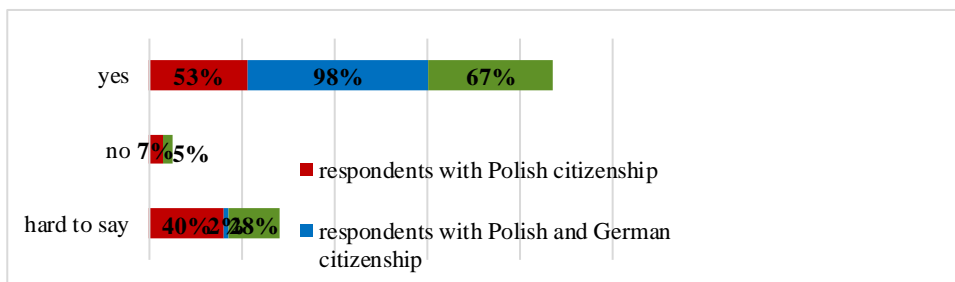
Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the question: Does ethnic diversity positively influence socio-economic regional development of the Opole Province?



Source: Own elaboration.

Among local governments declaring only Polish citizenship, 53% claimed that the German minority had a positive impact on the development of the Opole region, only 7% of them gave a negative answer, while 40% of respondents had no opinion on this issue. On the other hand, among the surveyed representatives of local authorities related to the German minority, i.e., having both Polish and German citizenship, almost all because 98% gave a positive assessment, while only 2% of them did not have their own opinion.

Figure 2. Respondents' answers to the question: Does the German minority have a positive impact on the socio-economic regional development of the Opole Province?

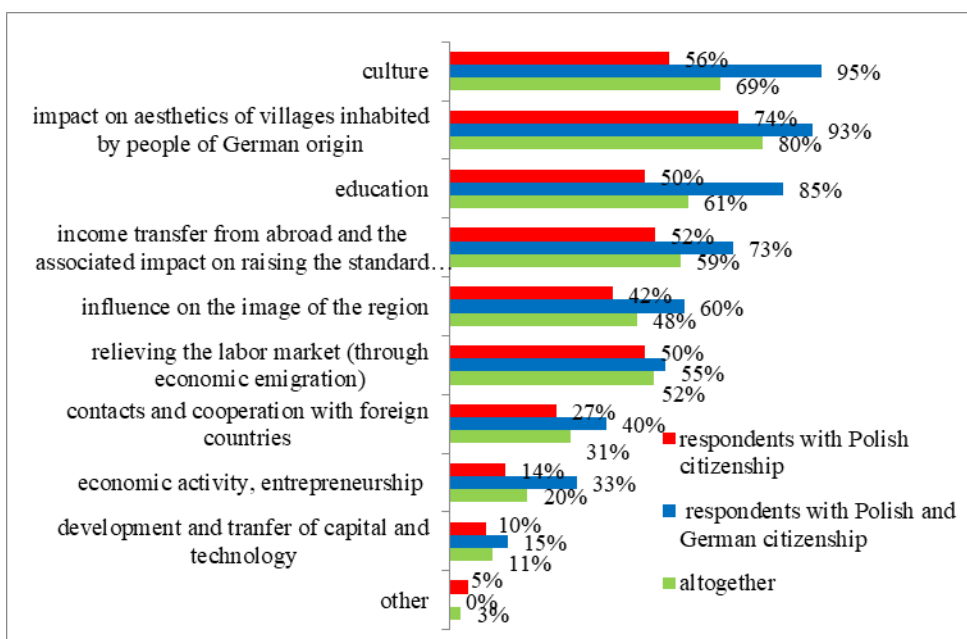


Source: Own elaboration.

Apart from the general question concerning the influence of the German minority on the development process, the respondents also were supposed to indicate areas in which, in their opinion, this influence is noticeable (Figure 3). The list of responses indicates a high similarity of both groups of respondents' responses in the perception of individual spheres. The most frequently indicated were the aesthetics of the towns and villages inhabited by the German minority (74% of respondents

with Polish citizenship and 93% of respondents with dual citizenship), the sphere of culture (56% and 95% respectively), and education (respectively: 50% and 85%). Indications), as well as the positive effects of economic migration related to the transfer of income and increasing the standard of living (respectively: 52% and 73% of indications) and relieving the labor market (respectively: 50% and 55% of indications). 42% of the Polish group respondents and 60% in the "minority" group pointed to the positive influence of people of German origin on the Opole region's image. On the other hand, a positive influence was noticed less frequently in such areas as economic activity and entrepreneurship (respectively: 14% and 33% of indications) and the development and transfer of capital and technology (respectively: 10% and 15% of indications).

Figure 3. Spheres of positive influence of the German minority in the opinion of representatives of local government.



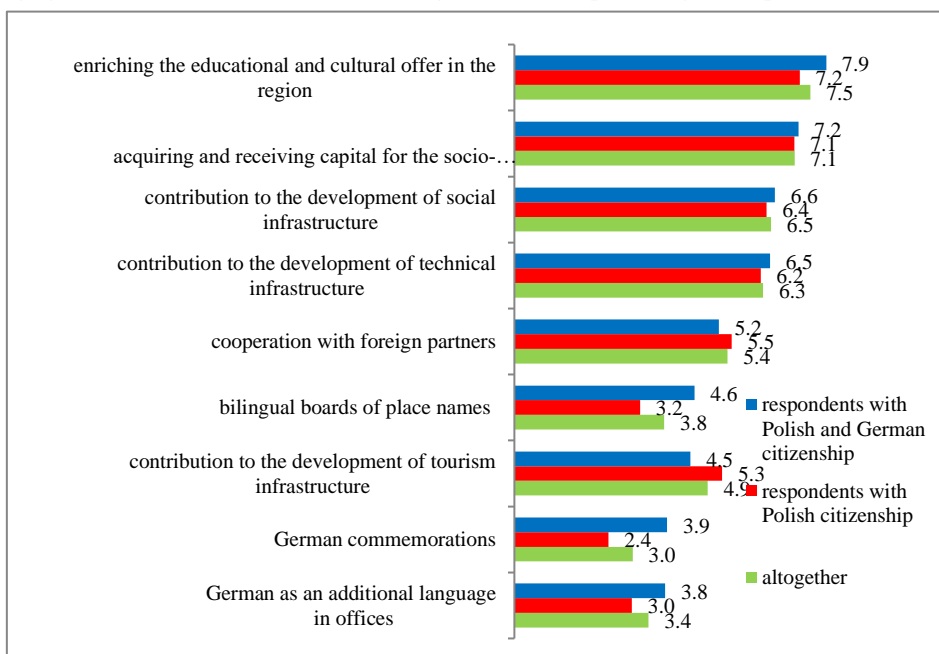
Source: Own elaboration.

The next area of socio-economic activity of the German minority involved in the study was its influence on shaping regional and local policy (Figure 4). Respondents were asked to evaluate the initiatives undertaken by representatives of the German minority from the Opole Province's socio-economic development perspective. In this assessment, various spheres were specified, and the respondents were asked to make a gradation and assign them several points - from a maximum of 9 points for the activities of minorities considered to be the most important in the sphere of development to 1 - for the least important activities in this area. The

surveyed local government officials were supposed to evaluate nine initiatives undertaken by representatives of the German minority.

Considering the conducted research, the enrichment of the educational and cultural offer in the region received the highest scores, which contains 7.5 points per 9 reviews. For local authorities from the point of view of socio-economic development, significant were activities related to acquiring and receiving capital for the region (7.1 points). The German minority activities, including their contribution to social (6.5 points) development and technical infrastructure (6.3 points), ranked next. The cooperation with foreign partners (5.4 points) and contributing to the development of tourism infrastructure (4.9 points) were also highly rated. In the opinion of the surveyed local government officials, the least important is the resolutions dedicating to bilingual boards of place names (3.8 points), the use of German as an additional language in offices (3.4 points), and activities aimed at cultivating German commemorations (3.0 points).

Figure 4. *Assessment of individual spheres of activities undertaken by representatives of German minority organizations from the point of view of their significance in the socio-economic regional development of the Opole Province.*



Source: *Own elaboration.*

The analyzes carried out in the local government environment prove that both in the opinion of the respondents of local government officials with only Polish citizenship, and those with Polish and German citizenship, the most important

initiatives undertaken by representatives of the German minority, include enriching educational and cultural offers. Above all, the sphere of cultural events should be mentioned here, including those fostering German or regional culture, as well as the extended offer of teaching the German language in schools and kindergartens, as well as organizing German language courses, the rich offer of scholarships, apprenticeships, and training system.

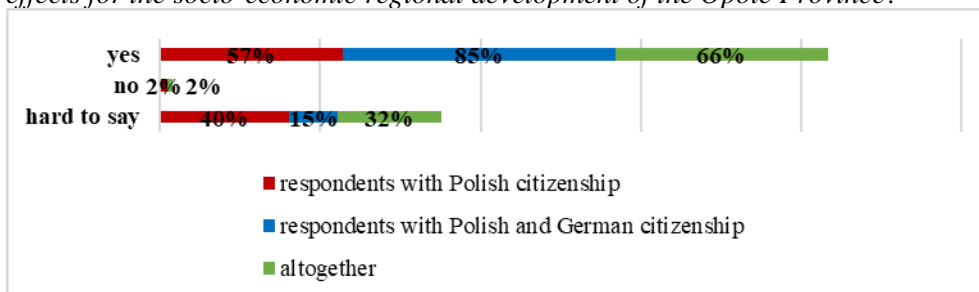
The surveyed representatives of local authorities also emphasized the importance of local government activities to acquire and receive capital for the region and those devoted to developing social, technical, and tourist infrastructure. An important initiative in examining regional authorities' opinion was extensive cooperation with foreign partners, including developing social and economic contacts, containing business, partnership, and patronage contacts with other regions of Europe, and establishing cooperation with German diplomatic representations and consulates.

An interesting research issue was the analysis of the surveyed local government officials' opinions on assessing the coexistence and cooperation of the Polish community with the German minority from the point of view of positive effects on the socio-economic development of the Opole Province (Fig. 5). In the opinion of 58% of respondents with only Polish citizenship and 85% of respondents with German origin, the Polish community's coexistence and cooperation with the German minority bring positive effects for the Opole's socio-economic development province. Only 2% of the Polish group stated that the coexistence and this cooperation did not bring positive effects from the Opole region's development point of view.

However, 40% of the respondents with Polish citizenship and 15% of the German origin respondents did not agree on this issue. It is worth emphasizing that both most of the respondents from the Polish group and the majority of those with German origin agreed with the thesis that the coexistence and cooperation of the Polish community with the German minority brings positive effects for the socio-economic development of the region (66% of all local authorities). However, this analysis may prove that the surveyed local authorities of German origin are more inclined to compromise and more oriented towards positive cooperation with other organizational groups in local governments than local representatives signifying the "Polish" group.

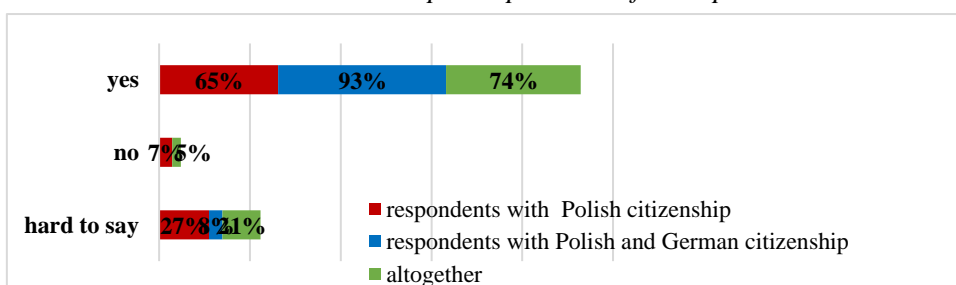
The further analyzed question was whether, in the respondents' opinion, the German minority should be treated as a regional development potential (Figure 6). Regardless of this question, respondents were then asked to identify areas in which this region's ethnic potential could be used. The answers concerning the first of these issues prove that in the assessment of the majority of local self-government officials, the German minority constitutes a significant development potential of the Opole Province (74%).

Figure 5. Respondents' answers to the question: Does the coexistence and cooperation of the Polish community with the German minority bring positive effects for the socio-economic regional development of the Opole Province?



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 6. Respondents' answers to the question: Does the German minority constitute the socio-economic development potential of the Opole Province?



Source: Own elaboration.

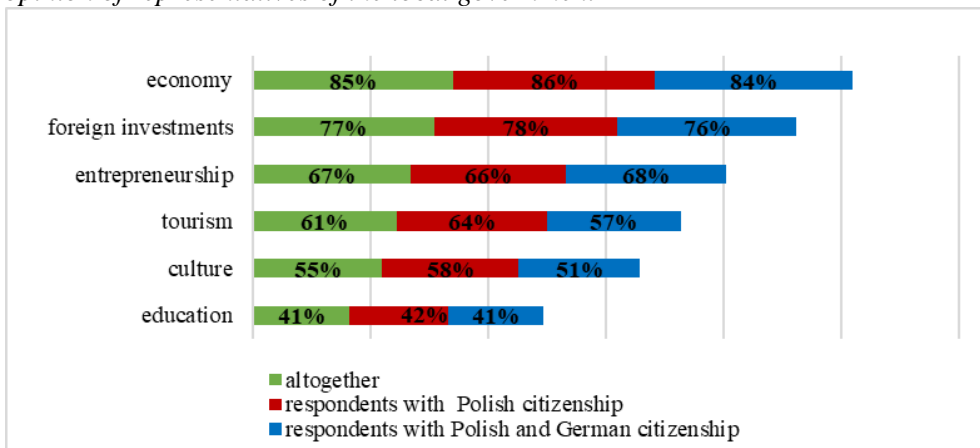
Whereas in the question dedicated to the postulated areas of development in which German minority could be used (Figure 7), the respondents most often mentioned economic development (85% of all respondents), then the attraction of foreign investments (77%), subsequently the development of entrepreneurship (67%), tourism (61%) and the culture development (55%). The least, though still quite a lot, indications concerned the development of education (41%). Few respondents mentioned other areas not suggested in the questionnaire.

It is worth mentioning that the distribution of accents in the postulated activity of the German origin population is perceived by all local governments similarly, regardless of the type of citizenship.

The last examined matter was the respondents' assessment of sufficient support for the German minority as a socio-economic development factor by the regional authorities (Figure 8). As to be expected, the answers in both distinguished groups of citizenship were different. Among local authorities having only Polish citizenship, around half answered the affirmative question (46%). In turn, in the group of respondents with German citizenship, over half believed that regional

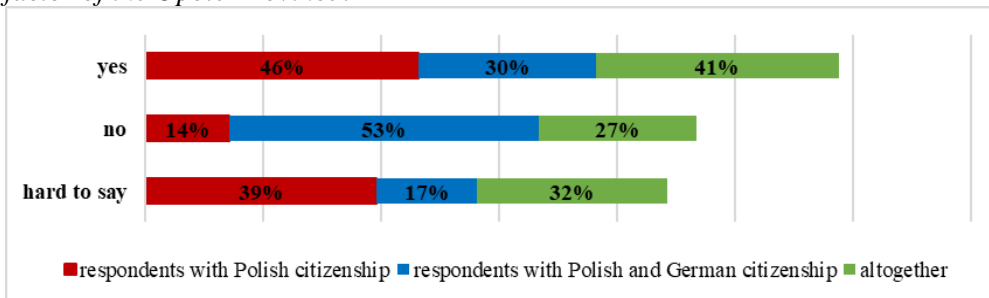
authorities did not sufficiently promote the German minority as a factor distinguishing the region. The surveyed regional representatives' responses show that merely 41% of the self-government officials consider the promotion of the German minority in the region as sufficient. On the other hand, the perception of deficits in this area, although more common in the group of local government officials associated with the German minority, is also noticeable among local government officials not related to it.

Figure 7. Development areas in which German minority could be used in the opinion of representatives of the local government



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 8. Respondents' answers to the question: Do the regional authorities sufficiently support German minority as a unique socio-economic development factor of the Opole Province?



Source: Own elaboration.

5. Concluding Remarks

The presented results of research on the influence of the German minority on the socio-economic regional development, although they highlight only some areas of its impact, still indicate a positive impact of ethnic diversity on the Opole

Province's development. The research also showed a large, though not fully used, potentially associated with this ethnic diversity.

The research carried out among the Opole Province local, and regional authorities confirmed the hypothesis that the impact of the German minority on the socio-economic regional development is assessed positively. Moreover, the surveyed local government officials pointed to the need to use the German minority more widely in regional development as a socio-economic regional potential, distinguishing main usage areas. In this case, economic development prevailed, and the development of entrepreneurship and attracting foreign capital investments.

The presented studies show that the German "difference" of the analyzed area constitutes an essential and generally positive factor in its development, but at the same time, the ethnic diversity of the region is not sufficiently supported. The research also showed that the vast majority of the surveyed local government officials positively assessed the Polish community's cooperation with the German minority. It may also prove that the German minority may positively influence the improvement of Polish-German relations.

Undoubtedly, the presence and expansion of ethnic groups are one of the challenges of the 21st century. On the one hand, the analysis results might be used in shaping an applicable development policy, including appropriate management of minority groups in regional development, which should constitute a permanent element of socio-economic regional development and a key factor in achieving sustainable development. On the other hand, regional authorities should consider using minority groups to substantially potential regional development, a primarily economic one. Research results can also contribute to the construction of theoretical models regarding ethnic groups and local and regional development.

This paper also points to the need for further research concerning the German minority and other national and ethnic minorities, especially in current events in Europe. Since there is no doubt that today Europe is facing strategic civilization challenges, one of the key problems is society's future shape with its mosaic diversity of national and ethnic minorities.

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