



## BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR WESTERN AFFAIRS

### ■ Polish organizations in Germany - standing and contributing factors

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Germany is home to approximately one hundred Polish organizations. Although the history of the Polish movement in Germany dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the available knowledge on the movement is relatively sketchy and either limited to historical facts or, with respect to the present standing and activities, only cursory. This is evidenced by the fact that the public discourse frequently labels given organizations as weak due judging them mainly on inner rifts and arguments. Is this popular belief true? Have organizations indeed succumbed to a permanent crisis? If so, what are the true causes of their quandaries? I attempt to address these questions on the basis of the research I have conducted at the Institute for Western Affairs since 2008. I have embarked on defining the most prominent features of Polish organizations in Germany and identifying the factors that have contributed to their present condition.

#### Features of Polish organizations in Germany

##### *Dominance of organizations established in the 1990s*

Although the Polish movement in Germany is comprised of organizations that represent many different migration waves, the dominant category of associations are those set up in the 1990s and whose members are largely the migrants who arrived in Germany in the 1980s. While the number of younger organizations founded after 2000 either before or after Poland's accession to the EU is growing continually, such growth is not sufficiently rapid to allow them to dominate the scene of Polish organizations in Germany any time soon.

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Such dominance goes beyond a mere prevalence in numbers and extends to qualitative factors. The organizations that hold sway on the scene are more likely to establish umbrella entities, maintain a stronger presence in public discourse and influence the image of the overall Polish sector in Germany.

The dominance of the organizations established in the 1990s has resulted primarily from the general features of Polish migrations to Germany. In terms of numbers, the majority of the Poles living in Germany left their home country in the 1980s. Such Poles account for the majority of the members for the organizations set up in the 1990s and form their key membership base. The growth of the organizations founded in the 1990s was facilitated by the Polish-German Treaty on Good Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation of June 17, 1991, which rekindled hopes, futile as it turned out, among Poles living in Germany of having Germany support Polish associations.

### ***Gaps in institutional coverage***

Polish organizations in Germany focus on the four major objectives of promoting Poland in German society, improving Polish-German relations, furthering culture and upholding national identity.

Meanwhile, other, equally valid services such as advocacy, immigrant counseling and social aid (which is particularly deficient) have remained largely neglected. As a consequence, the institutional scene is incomplete, meaning that, collectively speaking, the institutions that do exist are ill-prepared to satisfy all of the needs of the Polish community. Thus, Poles living in Germany are forced to search for specific services outside of Polish organizations and turn to e.g. German institutions or the business sector, including Polish-owned enterprises. This may adversely impact the perceived needs of Poles living in Germany and their ability to rely on the services of Polish organizations and on their image. The most affected category of immigrants are the more recent ones who are also the most in need of advocacy, canceling and the help of professional associations. This applies in particular to immigrants representing specific professions such as medical doctors and engineers.

The above-described profiles of Polish organizations in Germany are chiefly the result of the dominance of organizations that stem from the 1990s. A big part of the reason why they have chosen to emphasize certain services over others is their predilection for catering primarily to the interests of their core membership base, i.e. the migrants who reached Germany in the 1980s. On the other hand, Polish organizations at large have been observed to select specific areas of focus to which they dedicate all of their efforts. This may well be inspired by the terms of the Treaty which commits to support institutions that deal with culture and identity.

### ***The coexistence of collaboration and conflicts***

Research has found that in addition to collaborating with one another, Polish organizations in Germany compete against one another and frequently end up at loggerheads.

Data show that although a certain degree of collaboration has evolved among individual organizations, they are far from realizing the ideal of every organization working with all others. The cooperation that exists has been confined within specific dividing lines. Quite commonly, such cooperation is also occasional and superficial. The Polish movement in Germany has never achieved close integration. While a number of umbrella organizations have emerged, they only associate selected organizations.

Disagreements and friction among Polish organizations occur regularly. Such organizations occasionally compete with one another, driven by the severe fragmentation of their sector and forced to vie for limited resources. The conflicts have the effect of tarnishing the sector's image. On closer analysis, it is evident that although the differences keep some of the organizations from engaging in joint undertakings, they have not reached the point where they would completely block or derail collaboration.

The root cause of the competition and disagreements among Polish organizations lies in their fragmentation. Differences tend to occur along the lines that separate individual migration waves. Thus, disputes arise between the "old" and the "new" organizations that represent the "old" and the "new" migrants. However, clashes also break out among organizations established by members of the same migration waves. Their main causes are also differences, although this time they have to do with social status and affluence, political views and the experience of their members. The competition and conflicts are deepened by serious financial shortages and the limited availability of funding. Further barriers to cooperation come from the highly individualized approach of many organization leaders and the considerable geographical dispersal of organizations.

#### ***Extensive cooperation with Polish public administration***

The Polish public administration is an essential partner for Polish organizations in Germany. Particularly close cooperation has developed between them and the Polish diplomatic corps which, in many cases, plays the role of the key partner of such organizations. Commonly, the cooperating bodies are consulates which support Polish organizations (financially and otherwise) in their work. In rare cases, their support takes the form of consultations regarding the challenges faced by Poles in Germany and by the organizations themselves.

#### ***Mediocre cooperation with German institutions***

The extent to which Polish organizations in Germany work together with the German public administration is only mediocre. The most common cooperation partners in this sector are federal state bodies. Much less frequent are the relations between Polish organizations and central administrative agencies and, interestingly, local authorities.

At the national and local level, cooperation is typically launched with bodies specializing in migrant relations. This differs at the central level where such relations are usually maintained by federal government representatives in charge of culture and the media who are vested with the authority to award cultural project funds to Polish organizations. On the other hand, collaboration with institutions responsible for migration and integration has been fairly limited.

Only very rarely do Polish organizations in Germany engage with German political parties. Despite attempts to establish relations with such parties, which are at times successful, only sporadic instances of steady effective cooperation have been discovered. One of the factors limiting the relationships with the German public administration at various levels is Germany's failure to consider Polish organizations in that country to be an important partner. Firstly, perceived as an "invisible" and unproblematic community, Poles living in Germany attract little attention and are neither a priority in integration policies nor an active participant in the integration discourse. Secondly, having relatively small memberships and a limited ability to appeal to Poles living in Germany, Polish organizations are not seen as representative of the Polish community (which is also one of the reasons for poor relations with German political parties). Another barrier to the collaboration between Polish organizations and the German administration stems from Germany's failure to live up to its Treaty commitments to support Polish associations. This refusal has in fact radicalized Polish organization leaders who tend to view the failure as an expression of ill will and discrimination on the part of German administration.

### **Mediocre cooperation with other immigrant organizations operating in Germany and migrant councils**

Polish organizations in Germany make few contributions to the development of the German immigration landscape. Their collaboration with such consultation bodies as migrant councils and immigrant organizations is fairly limited and, where it occurs, commonly superficial. However, the distancing itself from other immigrants weakens the Polish community and the organizations that represent it. Not only do some Polish organizations refrain from applying for the funds available for migrants but also refuse to work together with the organizations that represent other nationalities.

Many Polish leaders fail to perceive other immigrant organizations as worthy partners and would rather not be associated with immigrant communities which generally have a poor image in German society.

### ***Limited human resources***

None of the Polish organizations in Germany have a mass following. Poles living in Germany tend to refrain from engaging in their work. As a consequence, many Polish organizations find themselves unable to recruit a sufficient number of staff.

One of the main reasons for this are the behavior patterns and habits brought from the home country in which civic society participation is relatively limited. Another significant factor is the fragmentation of the Polish community in Germany resulting from internal differences. A major barrier to the involvement of Poles living in Germany in the work of Polish organizations is the fact that the organizations are relatively unknown and that the services they offer are a poor match for the current needs of the community.

### ***Lack of institutional continuity***

A study of the management boards of Polish organizations found that the organizations are “ageing” with little generational renewal. Rarely are persons under 35 years of age allowed to run such organizations.

Many of the organizations which have remained in operation for extended periods find it difficult to attract young people. Very few can claim they mainly represent the young.

A great number of the organizations are managed predominantly by their leaders. Strong, charismatic and active leaders can keep an organization active. However, there is a down side to a reliance on leaders alone. The institutional structures of the organizations examined are developed quite poorly. The resulting danger is that once a leader stops being active for whatever reason, the organization will either grind to a halt completely or be forced to significantly reduce its activities. This principle applies even to the largest and longest-standing organizations.

In addition to leader personalities, the lack of institutional continuity results from the internal fragmentation of the Polish community. Cooperation between members of different migration waves and different generations is relatively uncommon.

### ***Poor financial standings***

The majority of the researched organizations have turned out to be underfunded. Their annual budgets rarely exceed € 5,000. Only a handful have been found to post revenues in excess of € 50,000. More than a half of the organizations own few assets such as offices or even office equipment.

The financial shortcomings make it very hard for the organizations to operate and, in some cases, stand in the way of achieving their missions properly. They also adversely influence their image as well as that of the entire Polish movement in Germany.

One way in which the organizations overcome their financial straits is by focusing on projects. They raise funds for specific ventures thus keeping themselves very active. As a consequence, however, they constantly expand their energies on fund-raising and operate with a sense of uncertainty and instability.



A major implication of the financial shortages is very unprofessional performance resulting from having no paid staff.

The financial shortages are the consequence of a combination of adverse factors. Firstly, the “invisibility” of the Polish community and its relatively good integration with German society put Poles and their organizations outside of the scope of interest of the German integration policy. Hence, hardly any special programs designed to support Polish organizations are available. Secondly, due to the negative image that immigrants have in a substantial section of German society, Poles do not want to be associated with immigrants. Therefore, a certain proportion of the organizations avoid using the German integration funds. Thirdly, Polish diaspora policy fails to provide sufficient funds to improve the financial shortcomings of Polish organizations. Funding shortages and the way funds are distributed (none or very little funding finances overhead and day-to-day operating expenses) prevent support from Poland from becoming a significant driver of organizational development. Fourthly, Germany’s significant failures to live up to the provisions of the Treaty that require support for Polish organizations in Germany cuts them off from yet another potential source of funding.

All in all, Polish organizations in Germany appear to be in a state of permanent crisis. Their troubles tie inseparably to more profound factors associated with the features of the Polish community in Germany, the condition of Polish civic society, the tenets and execution of diaspora policy, the German integration policy, the perception of immigration and integration in German society and the status of Polish-German relations, particularly Germany’s performance on its obligations under the Polish-German Treaty on Good Neighborship and Friendly Cooperation of June 17, 1991. Put together, the above factors make up a transnational environment that affects the growth potential and standings of immigrant organizations.

The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

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