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Addressing Linguistic and Territorial Aspects of National Identity Through Short Documentaries: The Case of The German Minority in Upper Silesia

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Abstract

The article is focused on the intersection of documentary filmmaking and minority identities, specifically addressing the case of the German minority in Upper Silesia (Poland). The scientific goal is to analyse how the multilayered national identity of members of that group is discussed in the short documentaries broadcast within the television programme “Schlesien Journal”. This is addressed through two detailed angles concerning language and geographical space, as both are related to the key identity features characterising that group. Based on a mixed-method approach consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews and audiovisual content analysis, the article argues that, in relation to language, German is clearly prioritised in the short documentaries as a central identity marker, despite the minority’s plurilingual profile characterised by the strong parallel presence of Silesian and Polish. Territory-wise, the local embeddedness is highlighted alongside the global connections of the region, thus suggesting a more cosmopolitan identity profile.

Keywords: documentary; short documentary; minority languages; minority language media; identity; German minority; Upper Silesia; German language; Schlesien Journal

Journal on Ethnopolitics and
Minority Issues in Europe

Vol.25, No.2, 2026

pp.66–89

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53779/SEBO0906>

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Introduction: Context, the research question, and methodological considerations

According to the hitherto conducted research, the German minority living in the historical region of Upper Silesia in Poland (which in the past also belonged to Bohemia, Austria, and Prussia) presents a complex case in terms of its language and identity-related profile. With regard to the former aspect, the minority moves within a linguistic universe primarily consisting of German, Polish, and Silesian. Educational and other efforts aiming at the strengthening of German are manifold; nevertheless, the aforementioned broader plurilingual landscape remains unchanged to a significant degree. Similarly, the identity is constituted of a comparably rich combination of variants, with some members of the community identifying unequivocally as German, while others lean towards Polish or Silesian identity, with complex identities involving these variants being also very frequent. Furthermore, the minority is strongly embedded in its Silesian area of settlement (this takes place within several contexts, including involvement in the political processes at different levels in the region), while also being exposed to the surrounding Polish culture and society, and its kin-state Germany both through the institutional ties (connecting organisations representing the minority and Berlin) and social relations (this is due to various demographic processes affecting the community in the post-1945 period; for this, see Cordell, 2000, pp. 75-96).

Crucially, this multifaceted situation is the focus of debate and continuous reflection within the German minority itself. This takes place in various spaces, with a prominent one being the system of minority language media (hereinafter: MLM) created for and by this community. The specific interest here concerns short documentaries produced in the context of its weekly television news bulletin entitled “Schlesien Journal”. Due to the aforementioned socio-linguistic dynamics within which the production, broadcasting, and consumption of such content takes place, those short documentaries can be considered as created with the intention of providing “a sense of shared identification around which an audience can be oriented” (Aguayo, 2019, p. 6). It is equally possible to claim that this example of the audiovisual content can be linked to the construction of a specific collective cultural identity, as the individual episodes are linked to such constitutive aspects of it as traditions, heritage, aesthetics, memory etc. (Lustig and Koester, 2010, p. 142).

Consequently, the research question guiding this article is: how was the multilayered national identity of members of German minority in Poland addressed in short documentaries broadcast on an almost weekly basis in the television programme “Schlesien Journal”? Due to the complexity of the notion of national identity, this study will focus solely on two related aspects: approaches to the German language as a crucial identity marker, and geographical territory as a factor linked to the shaping of identity; in other words, how these themes were represented and interpreted in this programme. To achieve this, the article first unpacks the concept of a (short) documentary and links it to minority communities and identities. This is followed by an overview of the community in focus, concisely highlighting its demography,

identity profile, and introducing its key television programme, “Schlesien Journal”. Overall, these elements lay ground for the main scientific goal of the present article mentioned above.

The concept of (short) documentary is applied to the first part of each weekly edition of “Schlesien Journal”. In most cases, this segment focuses on places of importance for German minority, its history, prominent personalities, institutional life, cultural initiatives etc. Occasionally, some of these aspects overlap within a single programme. The reason why the category of documentary is applied to this specific audiovisual content is justified by several characteristics of the segment: it was clearly detached from the typical news content presented in the second part of each programme, with this differentiation being also highlighted in the host’s announcement; it provided a much more nuanced take on a given topic compared to a classic news item (the longer running time allowed either for a diversity of opinions or deeper reflection on the main person in focus); it also used sound and visual techniques uncommon in news programmes, such as music corresponding with the presented topic or shots (sometimes relatively long) focusing on certain aspects such as nature or architectural details.

Empirically, the analysis is based on two main sources. The first is an audiovisual content analysis, where the opening parts of “Schlesien Journal” were analysed for the period April–September 2023. This resulted in a pool of 26 programmes, with 21 considered as relevant in the present context, and the remaining 5 falling outside the category of a short documentary as these were extended interviews with, for example, the chairman of the German minority in Poland or persons responsible for various cultural projects. Ultimately, 13 short documentaries out of the 21 were selected for discussion here, as they were considered as most densely related to the main analytical angles – that is, language and geographical space. The procedural aspects of the analysis are explained in more detail in the penultimate section of this article.

The second empirical pillar of the article consists of two semi-structured in-depth interviews with persons responsible for the production of “Schlesien Journal”, conducted in order to better understand the creative process behind it. The relatively small sample is justified by the fact that the production team consisted of a very limited number of persons (for more on this, see the section below introducing the programme). The interviews took place in the autumn of 2023 via Zoom. They were recorded, subsequently transcribed, translated into English, and edited for readability. Topic-wise, they addressed questions related to the technical and budgetary aspects of the production; the division of work between news and documentary content; the rationale behind the short documentaries; the selection of topics for that module; and strategies related to language use. In the analytical sense, the interviews allowed the author to better understand how the documentary part of the programme was produced, its purpose and thematic profile, with relevant content directly quoted and interpreted in the subsequent parts of this article. The language of the interviews was Polish; however, during one of them, the interviewee used German words or concepts in several instances. Importantly, both interviewees were asked to familiarize themselves with and subsequently sign an informed consent form. This document explained the scientific

purpose of the interview, outlined the rights of the interviewees, detailed the institutional anchoring of the interviewer, and covered aspects such as the storage of data etc. Furthermore, the participants had the option to choose between anonymised or non-anonymised use of their quotations in the article. Since this resulted in one of the interviewees preferring the anonymised option, it was decided to anonymise all quotations used in the text.

Between documentaries, minority identities, and minority language media

As Jonathan Kahana remarked (2016, p. 1) “(...) documentary is a notoriously slippery eel, perhaps the oldest and slipperiest concept in the history of cinema’s public and commercial modes and genres”, whilst at the same time expressing his sympathy towards John Corner’s argument that there are certain formal and informal ways of making a documentary. Nevertheless, as Bill Nichols argues (2001, p. 21), documentaries are limited neither by a defined set of techniques, topics addressed, nor formal and stylistic aspects. The eel does not become less slippery when Patricia Aufderheide broadly defines documentary as “not a movie. Or at least not a movie like ‘Star Wars’ is a movie” (2007, p. 1). This elusive nature of documentary – frequently interpreted through a “series of refusals” (Beattie, 2004, p. 2) – is also highlighted by Frank and Marie Barnas (2024, pp. 77-78), who point towards the unique array of artistic tools at the disposal of documentary creators, resulting in creative freedom unparalleled in other media formats: from first-person interviews, through music and sound effects, to the recreation of historical situations. Furthermore, documentary gives its creators a significant degree of flexibility regarding the running time, with short (or mini) documentaries having a length of several minutes, whilst at the opposing end one can find examples of running times amounting to many hours (Barnas & Barnas, 2024, p. 78). That freedom is further facilitated by developments first resulting in the relatively widespread availability of video technology and the subsequent proliferation of digital tools, thus democratising the practice of documentary filmmaking.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies*’ concise definition (2012, p. 126), documentary (or, in other words, a factual film) is a genre focusing on factual issues, persons, and institutions, with its purpose including educational, informative, and consciousness-raising aspects. Content-wise, they address reality through focusing on a wide array of topics such as public affairs, government propaganda, advocacy, history, ethnography, and nature (Aufderheide, 2007). Crucially for the present considerations, they tend to discuss concepts and subjects which are debated or contested (Nichols, 2001, p. 67). These include the interplay of gender with race, nationality, religion, social class etc. (French, 2022); disability (Brylla & Hughes, 2017); or ethnicity as linked to such communities as, for instance, African-Americans (Klotman & Cutler, 1999, p. 13), Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews in Israel (Bahar, 2021), and Kurds in Turkey (Koçer & Candan, 2016).

Importantly, where language - in a given minority context - is (one of) the key identity markers, this aspect also becomes a crucial feature of documentary filmmaking, as evidenced

by the examples of Welsh-language documentaries (Sills-Jones & Haf Gruffydd Jones, 2021). In such a context, documentary can contribute to the enhancing of spaces where minority/minoritized languages are used freely, whilst showcasing the plurality of linguistic practices within a given community (Jones, 2021). Within the broader media field (Lister et al., 2009, p. 9), the above-discussed perspective also reveals the proximity between documentaries and MLM. This is because – using Mike Cormack’s interpretation of Donald Browne’s and Stephen H. Riggins’ conceptual reflections on the purpose of such media – they allow minorities, among others, to express their culture and values, strengthen their languages, alongside putting a visible symbol of their existence in the public sphere (Cormack, 2007, pp. 5-9). As was discussed above, documentaries – just like MLM – can represent dense interconnections between minority languages, cultures, and identities (Le & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2018, p. 358), whilst making a useful content format for such outlets. Such a situation is thoroughly discussed in the subsequent parts of this article.

The community in focus: The German minority in Upper Silesia
A census-based demographic snapshot

Based on Poland’s most recent census, this section concisely profiles the German minority living in the Polish part of Upper Silesia. Administratively, this historical region is divided between Poland’s Opole and Silesian Voivodeships, whilst its southernmost part lies in the Czech Moravian-Silesian Region. The 2021 census resulted in the following figures concerning German as a variant of ethnonational identity:

Table 1: German identity in Poland’s 2021 National Census.

Identification category	Number
Total self-identifications as German	144,177
Total self-identifications as German alongside Polish	98,336
German as the first identity mentioned	42,558
German as the second identity mentioned	101,619
German as the only identity mentioned	23,495

Based on Tablice z ostatecznymi danymi (2023); author’s own representation.

This suggests a picture of the German minority as relatively strong in the demographic sense; however, it clearly shows that identity-wise, the community paints a complex picture, with only a small part of its members mentioning German as their sole identity. Importantly, although the results contain figures concerning the combination of German identity with Polish, it is not possible to find information about alternative combinations. In terms of the regional distribution – key from the perspective of this article – the minority is the strongest in Opole Voivodeship with 59,911 people, comprising 41.6% of the whole German minority. The second-largest concentration is in the Silesian Voivodeship: 27,923 people, comprising 19.4% of the whole community.

When it comes to the regions with the highest number of persons mentioning German as one of the languages used at home, the figure for Opole Voivodeship is 34,489, whereas for the Silesian Voivodeship it is 32,024. Notably, the number of people in Opole Voivodeship claiming to communicate at home in German is smaller than the size of the German community within this administrative unit; in the case of the Silesian Voivodeship, this figure is slightly higher. In this context, it is worth mentioning that those two voivodeships are the ones with the highest number of persons identifying as Silesian. Although this disputed ethnicity/nationality is not recognized in any way by the Polish authorities, the total number of Silesian identifications stood at 60,049 for Opole Voivodeship and 517,100 for the Silesian Voivodeship. Moreover, the linguistic landscape there also features Silesian prominently. Though unrecognized as a minority or regional language, it is nevertheless used at home by 84,616 people in Opole Voivodeship and 376,369 in the Silesian Voivodeship. The cultural and linguistic proximity between the German and Silesian minorities is probably the decisive factor explaining the discontinuities, inconsistencies, and fluctuating numbers mentioned above (Urban, 2015, pp. 615-616): some members of the German minority in Opole Voivodeship speak Silesian (or, as will be discussed in the following sections, even Polish) at home, some of those self-identifying as Silesians use German at home, whereas boundaries in terms of the national identity are similarly porous and in constant flux. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that controversial measures introduced in recent years by the Polish Ministry of Education, under the control of the national-conservative Law and Justice political party (ousted from power in October 2023) and which violated the linguistic rights of the German minority in Poland, have further complicated this picture by, among others, resulting in the decrease of teaching hours of German language in schools (Mazurkiewicz, 2022).¹

Identity

Following the interpretations of Jan Penrose and Richard C. M. Mole (2008, p. 277), national identity can be understood as linked to the internalisation of various national symbols. This allows both individual and collective actions towards improvements/modifications of the aforementioned markers. The aspect of agency is also emphasised by Andreas Wimmer when discussing the correlated issue of ethnic identities (2013, pp. 45-46): political movements or interacting individuals can be understood as being in constant “boundary work”, reinforcing or shifting borders concerning identity. Importantly, and as pointed out by Kanchan Chandra, even individual ethnic identities built upon “descent-based attributes” are prone to change, although usually over longer periods (2012, p. 133). It should be added that such internally dynamic collective identities (and imagined nations constructed upon them) have “finite, if elastic, boundaries beyond which lie other nations” and national identities (Anderson, 2006, p. 7).

While also conceptualising national identity as a living phenomenon, David Miller (1995, pp. 21-27) mentions several elements constituting it: belief in a shared set of national characteristics; historical continuity; connection to a geographical space (sometimes linked to control over that territory, including the symbolic landscape concerning monuments,

museums, or topographical names – see Nijakowski 2016, pp. 185-188); “a common public culture” whereby members of a given nation share a set of certain political beliefs and cultural features related to religion or willingness to preserve a national language. Although Miller appreciates the perception of sportsmen’s actions as contributing to the maintenance of national identity (his intuitions are shared by many scholars – see, for example, De Waele et al., 2018), he is sceptical about considering food or music as part of it (Miller, 1995, pp. 24 and 26). There is, however, a growing pool of literature arguing that such features significantly shape national identities, with Ronald Ranta and Atsuko Ichijo (2022) convincingly showing how both bottom-up and top-down approaches to food production and consumption shape nations. Vianna (1999), Regev and Seroussi (2004), Washabaugh (2012), or Siamdoust (2017), conversely, discuss the complexities of musical influences on the invention and re-invention of national identities in countries like Brazil, Israel, Spain, and Iran, respectively. Considered altogether, these elements contribute to national narratives with their thickness varying across specific cases, depending on how content-rich they are (Mylonas & Tudor, 2023, pp. 47-48).

How are these conceptual considerations on the core aspects of national identity related to the specific case of the German minority in Upper Silesia? For instance, a survey of 257 members of the local branches of German minority in Opole Voivodeship conducted by Magdalena Lemańczyk and Mariusz Baranowski (2020) revealed that 87% of respondents hold German citizenship, whilst at the same time only 36.9% of them identified as Germans, with 58.1% primarily feeling Silesian. Similar dynamics were detected in relation to language. For 61.3% of the respondents Silesian was a mother tongue, followed by Polish (21.8%), and German (16.8%). In terms of language used at home, German as the only language was mentioned by a mere 2% of the respondents, in combination with Silesian by 24%, whereas 16% used German alongside Silesian and Polish. The strongest individual home language was Silesian, indicated by 28% of the participants. German ancestors and self-identification as a German were most frequently mentioned (71% in total) as decisive factors for identifying as a German. In terms of the group’s identity, results concerning institutional membership in minority organisations are also of relevance. When asked about benefits resulting from such membership, the respondents highlighted, among others, contacts with other members of the community (80%), the possibility to strengthen one’s knowledge concerning the German heritage of Opole region (75%) or national identity (73%), as well as language-related aspects like the opportunity to speak German (72%) leading to the improvement of language fluency (73%).

Conducted over a decade earlier, Paweł Popieliński’s (2011) research on German minority youth in Opole and the Silesian voivodeships was based on a survey of 102 persons in the age bracket 16-28. In terms of national identification, 29.4% of respondents self-identified as Silesians, closely followed by 28.4% as Poles. Different variants of German self-identification were much less frequent: German identity was clear in only 13.7% of cases, whereas a combination of German and Silesian identities was mentioned by 5.9% of respondents. When

interpreting the results of his survey concerning the language of communication with family members (parents and grandparents), friends, and acquaintances, Popieliński ascertains that: “In general, Polish is most frequently the language of social communication of the studied group, less often Silesian dialect, and much less frequently German” (2011, p. 163).² At the same time, c. 40% of the German minority youth assessed their knowledge of German as very good; c. 30% as good; and c. 20% as average. As for the main reasons justifying different variants of self-identification, the respondents mentioned: identification/bonds with the place of birth and residence (almost 35%); upbringing/identification with language, culture, and tradition (30%); blood ties/origins (almost 20%); mentality (almost 5%); and cosmopolitan/European identification (less than 5%).

The above snapshot of the national identity of members of the German minority in Upper Silesia creates a picture of manifold complexities, whilst at the same time allows the observation of several aspects linked to the conceptual considerations briefly introduced at the beginning of this section. In terms of the elements constituting the group’s identity, there is a strong connection to a geographical space/symbolic landscape: it clearly shapes identities but, at the same time, the region’s complex history results in their different varieties, allowing for self-identifications anchored in local/regional perspectives on the one hand, and broader national categories on the other. Similarly, there is a visible linguistic component: the minority clearly functions in a multilingual space, defined by the parallel existence (sometimes at the level of families) of German, Polish, and Silesian, with the presence of the former relatively strong among youth. This suggests efforts related to language preservation and maintenance, countering the legacy of obstacles from the pre-1989 period, which took place within the contexts of “de-Germanisation” and “re-Polonisation”, two processes guided by the principles of ethnic homogenisation and the monopolist status of the Polish language (Kamusella, 2009, pp. 620-637). Historical continuity matters too: German ancestors are one of the decisive aspects for German identity, alongside culture (broadly defined), and traditions. For some members of the German minority, their identity evolves within minority organizations, which create social networks frequently informed by a set of political beliefs related to the importance of minority rights, appreciation of cultural diversity, or the significance of European cooperation. Consequently, it can be argued that, at the level of individual internalization, the identity in focus results in a colourful mosaic of variants, thus suggesting elasticity whilst at the same time delimiting boundaries, even if permeable, beyond which other national identities begin.

“Schlesien Journal”: a television programme of the German minority³

At the time when the author’s research on short documentaries was conducted, the television presence of the German minority in Poland consisted solely of a weekly magazine, “Schlesien Journal”, broadcast by TVP Opole, TVP Katowice (both regional branches of Polish public television), and the private broadcaster TV Silesia. With a running time of approximately 12 minutes, it was produced within the community by a team consisting of six core members, including three journalists and three technicians. At times, the first group

increased to 4-5 persons. Importantly, some of them worked across formats, contributing to other media outlets of the German minority (Interviewee 2). Interestingly, none of its members worked on a full-time employment contract; formally, all contributed to the programme as freelancers (Interviewee 2).

Content-wise, each week the second part of the programme offered an overview of the most important news concerning the minority, whereas the first part consisted of a longer item, either in the form of a short documentary (a key component for the present article) or an interview with a prominent member of the minority such as a cultural or educational professional, etc. Within the former, regular series focusing on a specific topic were also broadcast, such as “Hallo DFK”⁴ (profiling local branches of the minority) or „Städte und Menschen”⁵ (discussing the history of Silesian towns/cities). The linguistic profile of the programme is covered in detail in the following part of the article.

Considering the size of the target community, “Schlesien Journal” was watched by a relatively substantial audience. As Interviewee 2 mentioned, the usual audience for TVP Opole was around 10,000 viewers per programme, whereas the weekly figure for TVS fluctuated between 12,000-20,000 viewers. In this context, the programme’s YouTube channel was also mentioned, with the average being 1,400 views per episode, but some of the programmes reached figures well above 10,000. This was attributed also to the channel functioning as the programme’s archive, making the content available across a longer time period and resulting in audience accumulation. The same interviewee considered these figures as positive, whilst highlighting that the programme, although primarily watched by members of the minority, also has an audience among the Polish majority attracted to its thematic profile.

Short documentaries and the identity of German minority in Upper Silesia

The intention behind the present section is to address the article’s main research goal – i.e., to look for connections between the identity of the German minority in Upper Silesia as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, and the short documentaries broadcast within the “Schlesien Journal” between April and September 2023. This audiovisual content analysis is guided by two secondary research questions:

- 1) How are languages spoken by the German minority used and represented in the first part of “Schlesien Journal”?
- 2) How does the programme define the territory which matters for the German minority?

Consequently, the following considerations are structured around two broad identity-related issues highlighted by the previous research addressing the identity of the German minority: these are related to language and geographic space. It should be noted that these aspects are not always mutually exclusive, and at times they may overlap in the context of a single short documentary.

Language: acknowledging the linguistic reality albeit with German setting the tone.

As mentioned in the preceding sections, the German minority in Upper Silesia presents a rather complex linguistic landscape, with three languages playing a significant role: German, Polish, and Silesian. To a significant degree this is a reflection of the above-mentioned long-term dynamics negatively affecting the transmission of German until 1989, with the situation improving significantly after that time, however, without the complete eradication of obstacles to full revitalisation. At the same time, for obvious reasons, German has been prioritised by the institutions of the minority, for instance as an important identity marker, as well as a factor connecting the minority to its kin-state and its funding frameworks supporting German minorities. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the choice of language in relation to the production of the first part of “Schlesien Journal” is guided by certain principles focusing on the balance between German and Polish. This, obviously, is consistent with practices of minority language media elsewhere. As Interviewee 2 mentioned:

“When we do interviews, we try to – following our principles – have them in German. As for the reportages, the situation is more varied. (...) We cannot always find people who speak German, but in such cases, we can say these things in German through voiceover.”

This aspect is confirmed and further nuanced by Interviewee 1:

“Well, the voiceover and texts which we create are always in German. The only thing which can be in Polish are individual statements. A museologist can speak in Polish if he is a top expert, no problem, and then we simply add German captions. Only in relation to the portrait of an individual or interview, the person in focus must be able to speak in German.”

The above paints a picture of a clear linguistic policy and preferences: German is considered the leading language of the programme, with certain types of content being delivered only in that language (and subtitled into Polish). At the same time, there is a parallel degree of linguistic pragmatism and flexibility, which makes the presence of Polish hardly marginal. The content delivered in Polish, however, is subsequently subtitled into German, with voiceover also used to enhance the overall amount of German. One aspect explaining this linguistic pluralism is the aforementioned flexibility – if the topic tackled in a given short documentary can be best explained by a guest who is well-informed but not able to speak German (or not confident enough to speak it in front of the camera), this is accepted. Nevertheless, the demographic and identity-related data discussed above cannot be lost from sight. Some of the topics covered which also focus upon issues typical for the minority and discussed by community members have to be addressed primarily in Polish due to the linguistic reality within the group. This aspect came to the fore also in an apparently unrelated discussion with Interviewee 1 about interns coming from Germany, who are involved in the production of “Schlesien Journal”:

“We also had interns, who had a grandmother or an aunt here; they lived with them during the internship with us – a really good thing. These are also interns from Germany, so they can work in German without any problems, but again: there are many Polish-speaking

people, institutions in the German minority etc., so we cannot send them everywhere, and this is very *schmerzlich*⁶ in this kind of work, because okay, we can do subtitles for television, but for radio I have to translate everything and make a voiceover. [U]nd das ist die deutsche Minderheit⁷ which speaks a lot in Polish and this is, well, *schwierig, schwierig*⁸ because we have a nice (...) museum or a nice person, who is really great, but only speaks Polish (...).”

Importantly, language itself is also the focus of several of the short documentaries analysed here. In them, the linguistic diversity of the context in which the German minority lives is also present, although the stress is visibly put on the prominence of German. One example of this is the programme discussing the significance of German for the economic prosperity of Opole Voivodeship as a whole and individual career opportunities for the region’s inhabitants (“Schlesien Journal”, 2 May 2023). The topic is approached on several levels. One of the angles is focused on the bilingual class in one of Opole’s secondary schools, with one of the students highlighting the positive experience of a holiday job in Germany where fluency in German was a key to the individual’s success. Another emphasised aspect is the number of jobs created in the region by companies either from Germany or with clients primarily located there. This is considered beneficial for those having language-related competencies but also capable of understanding cultural subtleties. The topic of external migration for better work opportunities, which has historically affected the German minority, was also addressed. According to the expert featured in the short documentary:

“The German language creates very good potential opportunities for development, very good opportunities for finding a job not far from one’s parents, hundreds of kilometres away, but here, with the possibility for preserving one’s social ties, family connections, and – this is a very important aspect – crucial for the development of our region.”

Several of the short documentaries address the topic of German language through the prism of educational contexts. This was the case of the programme discussing the project *LernRAUM.pl* coordinated by the German minority (“Schlesien Journal”, 25 April 2023). The main aim of this initiative was to improve the participants’ German through a series of creative workshops. As its offer was not addressed to beginners, it is possible to interpret the initial efforts to learn the language as a gateway to interesting socio-educational opportunities at the later stage. Importantly, another goal was the strengthening of the minority identity, for example through seminars on the history of Silesia. Another example concerns the 10th edition of the “Fairytale Night”. Within this project, the local branch of the German minority in Steblów/Stöblau organised a series of activities for children centred upon the “Town Musicians of Bremen” story by the Brothers Grimm. This created the opportunity to address via a short documentary the importance of fairytales and entertainment in educational processes linked to the learning of German. Although not mentioned directly in the programme, such initiatives can be also considered a useful tool to introduce children to the classic texts belonging to the historical core of the German literary tradition (“Schlesien Journal”, 1 August 2023).

The documentary part of “Schlesien Journal” sheds light on other dimensions of the German language as well. A notable example of this is the material broadcast in July 2023 (“Schlesien Journal”, 4 July 2023), illustrating the nexus between language, cityscapes, and cultural heritage. It is focused primarily on old signs in German which survived Polonisation attempts in the aftermath of World War II. The examples include the sign “Maschinenbau und Hütten Schule”⁹ on one of the buildings currently owned by the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice/Gleiwitz (which can be considered as a restoration effort coordinated by a large institutional actor), but also included several bottom-up attempts striving to preserve this rapidly decaying heritage. In the latter context, an example discussed at length was the renovation of a sign „Möbel und Waren-Credit-Haus“¹⁰ in the same city, with a resident of the building explaining in the short documentary how the otherwise “uninteresting” structure (from an architectural point of view) gained character resulting in continuous interest from passers-by. Some bottom-up initiatives took quite a creative approach. The word “Bäckerei”,¹¹ accidentally discovered during renovation works as an element of a sign “Bäckerei und Conditorei”,¹² has been turned – perhaps somewhat paradoxically – into a name of a clothing store in Bytom/Beuthen. Through this thematic angle, German is presented as an important aspect of local symbolic landscapes, appreciated by persons without links to the German minority as well. At the same time, the importance of learning German is implied – with adequate language competency, it is possible to better understand the local linguistic landscapes and the complex history of a given location.

Importantly, short documentaries profiled thematically like the one under consideration now illustrate comprehensively the versatility of the format and possibilities for more artistic approaches. It is perhaps best exemplified by the closing scenes in which a combination of different shots focusing on German language signs represent various aspects of this fragile heritage (Figure 1; clockwise from top left). First, the audience is exposed to the images of the successful restoration efforts mentioned above („Möbel und Waren-Credit-Haus” and “Bäckerei und Conditorei”), with subsequent shots zooming on three German language signs in different stages of decay: one legible and potentially easy to restore; another legible although rather badly damaged; and the final one far beyond the legibility stage with restoration perhaps no longer possible. The closing shot shifts focus between background and foreground: first, it is the third of the signs mentioned above, which later changes to the plants in the foreground, suggesting the possibility of the site (and perhaps all heritage, if left unattended) being reclaimed by nature.



Figure 1: A collage of shots from “Schlesien Journal” (4 July 2023) discussing historical signs in German. Composition – SB.

Taken together, the above-discussed linguistic principles and examples of content related to language result in a more comprehensive understanding of that aspect. Although the linguistic diversity characterising the situation of the German minority is hardly ignored in the short documentaries considered, a holistic picture emerges in which German is clearly prioritised (this is hardly surprising in a minority context, with language usually belonging to the key identity markers). This is suggested by the frequency of focus, coverage of language-related educational needs of different generations, and variety of topics addressing language as a part of a broader heritage; also, it appears as a crucial element of one’s anchoring in a geographic space important for the minority or a strategic asset in the context of individual careers. In this regard, “Schlesien Journal” can be considered as aspiring to influence the identity profile of the target community: the goal is to bring German to the centre of the minority’s attention. This combination of activist and protective aspects is confirmed by the approach to Silesian. In the pool of short documentaries analysed, only one included it relatively prominently. Broadcast on 12 September 2023, it focused on the “Europe Convergence” project, bringing together youth from France, Germany, and Poland to gain professional experience, build personal networks, and experience new cultures. One of the participants from Opole Voivodeship expressed his impressions in Silesian (“Schlesien Journal”, 12 September 2023). Although so widely spoken within the German minority, Silesian remains marginal in the scrutinised content.

Geographical space: (Upper) Silesia between global and local dimensions

As evidenced by the results of Popieliński’s (2011) research, places of birth and residence, together with a related feeling of closeness to them, significantly influence individual choices concerning the self-identification of members of the German minority, which is consistent with Miller and Nijakowski’s aforementioned conceptual intuitions linking identity to geographical space. Furthermore, census results show the dense concentration of the German

minority in specific regions of Poland. A logical question, therefore, is how the geographical space where the German minority lives is defined by the short documentaries discussed in this article. Before delving into audiovisual content analysis, it is worth to mention that the aspect of geographical space was addressed by Interviewee 1 when discussing the aims of the documentary part of “Schlesien Journal”:

“What do we want to achieve? We want to show Silesia, this is what I think, because sometimes we are in a Heimatmuseum,¹³ sometimes we show groups like in ‘Hallo DFK’ series or ‘Städte und Menschen’, a series as well. We want to show Silesia. Or portraits, because this is Silesia too.”

When asked to more precisely describe where Silesia is, Interviewee 1 said:

“Silesia... Well, geographically we visit both Niederschlesien and Oberschlesien.¹⁴ And where is that? Well, this is where our people are, I think. (...) People who have a connection with Silesia, who have roots.”

Subsequently the same interviewee added that the intention of the “Schlesien Journal” team is to show Silesia primarily through the prism of “people and history”, whilst such aspects as architecture or landscape (mentioned in the interview through the German word “Landschaft”) play important role as well.

The content of the short documentaries selected for analysis can be considered as indeed reflecting the geography-related considerations summarised above. At the same time, it reveals several aspects which further nuance the issue of the (imagined) boundaries of Upper Silesia.

At first sight, the visit to Głubczyce/Leobschütz – part of the series „Städte und Menschen” – can be considered a fairly conventional take on a place and its history. The town is shown through such historical buildings and structures as the market square, town hall, city walls, and the Franciscan monastery, whilst archaeological excavations create a possibility for discussing its economic life in the Middle Ages (“Schlesien Journal”, 15 August 2023). At the same time, the opening shots reveal the creative possibilities of the documentary technique of filmmaking: the narrative focuses on the town’s unusually-shaped market square, whilst the accompanying pictures show it on historical postcards (from the period before the town become part of Poland), as a contemporary 3D model, and from a bird’s-eye view (Figure 2; clockwise from top left). Thus, the viewer is able to learn about a unique feature of the town, alongside being exposed to suggestive imagery clearly evoking its complex history and belonging to different countries and cultural spheres.



Figure 2: A collage of shots from “Schlesien Journal” (15 August 2023) presenting the market square in Głubczyce/Leobschütz. Composition – SB.

Perhaps even more interesting is the introduction to this short documentary by the studio host as well as some of the secondary aspects mentioned in the voiceover. Both also directly influence the perception of the frontiers of Upper Silesia. In the introduction, it is emphasised that Głubczyce/Leobschütz is located in the vicinity of the border of Poland with Czechia. That this is not mere geographical trivia is suggested by subsequent information concerning the town's importance in relation to the granting of town privileges for different locations in Moravia. The historical ties with the now-Czech town of Opava/Troppau mentioned in the documentary, in turn, remind the viewer that the boundaries of the historical Silesia do not necessarily overlap with the current ones. The map, however, goes even further than that: the discussion of unique architectural features of the towers within the defensive walls places the town within the network of cultural connections with France and Middle East, while the socio-religious consequences of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation connect it to the key historical developments shaping Europe. It is worth pointing out that a similar interplay of local and global spaces is also visibly represented in another episode of the „Städte und Menschen” series, discussing the history of Prudnik/Neustadt (“Schlesien Journal”, 27 June 2023). In this case, references to strictly local architectural features are juxtaposed with the highlighting of connections with the territory of contemporary Czechia, as well as the global ambitions and outreach of linen and terrycloth factories owned by the nineteenth-century industrialist Samuel Fränkel. The fact that his products were appreciated elsewhere in Germany but also beyond, including such places as Britain and the United States, can be again interpreted as a case of a narrative constructing a map of Upper Silesia where rootedness in the local context is crucial, but certainly not excluding what lies beyond.

This non-parochial conceptualisation of territory comes across in other short documentaries as well. The episode discussing the German minority's annual pilgrimage to the Catholic sanctuary on St. Anne's Mountain (Góra Świętej Anny/St. Annaberg) operates at once at micro and macro levels in relation to the perceptions of space (“Schlesien Journal”, 13 June

2023). Within the former context, it showcases the mountain and the sanctuary itself, which is a very precise point on the map of Upper Silesia in both the geographical and the spiritual/religious sense. The perspective changes dramatically when attention turns to the pilgrims. One of them mentioned the emotional aspect of the pilgrimage, which for him is intimately interconnected with the history of his family. What is crucial here, however, is the fact that the interviewed person came to the sanctuary from Nuremberg in Germany. Through this, the map shifts again: if Silesia is “where our people are”, then the human map must also include the diaspora, be it persons forced to leave the region following border changes and population exchanges in the aftermath of World War II; those who emigrated primarily to West Germany during the communist period in Poland in the context of repatriation programmes; or more recent émigrés who left the region due to pragmatic motivations linked to educational or professional opportunities elsewhere.

Several of the analysed short documentaries focus on the geographical micro level specifically linked to the institutional life of the German minority. This concerns especially the episodes of the series “Hallo DFK”, presenting the activities of the community’s local branches. The episode of “Schlesien Journal” broadcast on 8 August 2023 featured DFK Dębska Kuźnia/Dembiohammer, whereas on 26 September 2023 attention was turned to DFK Kozłowice/Koselwitz. In terms of mapping, these short documentaries seem to be primarily focused on recording activities at the local level; nevertheless, they may also have a deeper functional trait. Since maps frequently show roads, paths, or trails connecting different points, it is possible to interpret “Hallo DFK” as a metaphorical guide not only increasing the internal coherence of the community through mutual visibility, but also via intra-community networking through the sharing of inspiring ideas, identification of possibilities for cooperation (also with members of the majority), and the like.

Another subcategory of the documentary content features geographical points of reference which could be classified as cultural ones, in combination with aspects related to educational tourism. These are places which are relatively accessible for the general public, with infrastructure (like visitor information boards) allowing for an informed visit revealing interesting aspects of the region’s past. One example involves the Polish-German educational path in Raszowa/Raschowa (“Schlesien Journal”, 18 April 2023). Thanks to eight bilingual boards, it is possible to get a detailed insight into the history of the local church, traditional crafts, and folklore. Within the context of the minority and its group identity, the path’s functional aspect seems to be the deepening of knowledge concerning local history and an increased grasp of Upper Silesia’s historical and contemporary diversity. Interestingly, even this seemingly hyper-local topic reminds the viewer also of the existence of the wider world: the project was inspired by a similar initiative implemented by the German minority in Hungary.

The artistic trait of the documentary format comes to the fore again in relation to a similarly local topic. Restoration efforts concerning the castle gardens of the Württemberg family in Pokój/Carlsruhe (“Schlesien Journal”, 9 May 2023) are presented as an attempt to

bring the former splendour back to a neglected landscape, clearly belonging historically to the sphere of the German culture. The complex and at the same time difficult past is most tellingly illustrated by a shot of a headless (decapitated?) statue of the king of Prussia, Frederick the Great (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The image of a headless (decapitated?) statue of the king of Prussia, Frederick the Great, in the gardens of Pokój/Carlsruhe.

The shot, although obviously having a documentary function showing the damaged heritage, is not free of artistic ambitions. Taken against the sun, it offers an interesting combination of light and shade. Its left side, composed of grey skies and the dark silhouettes of trees, can be interpreted as belonging to the past, marked by conflict, destruction, and the aforementioned neglect. The right side, by contrast, is full of sunlight revealing the impressive natural beauty of the park. The statue of Frederick the Great dominates the foreground: it is indeed damaged, nevertheless overall it seems to be rather well-preserved. Since it is positioned within the sunlit half of the shot, it is perhaps possible to read it as a sign of more promising recent decades: the scars of the past are visible and may be impossible to be erased entirely, but due to the efforts of such actors as the local civil society and authorities, the decay affecting German cultural heritage in many places has not only been stopped but also effectively reversed. Through such imagery, a small village and its story become a prominent point on the map of Upper Silesia and, simultaneously, an illustration of the socio-historical microcosm of Silesia: a place with a complicated history, characterised by a unique cultural heritage within its boundaries, with related initiatives striving towards its preservation.

Finally, space is also addressed as a secondary aspect in documentaries thematically focused on something entirely different. In Poland, Opole/Oppeln (the administrative centre of the Opole Voivodeship) is perhaps most widely-known because of the annual National Festival of Polish Song, held since 1963 in the iconic Opole amphitheatre. Can this inherently Polish space also be put on the map of Upper Silesia as seen by the creators of “Schlesien Journal”? The answer is affirmative: The episode of “Schlesien Journal” broadcast on 25 July 2023 focused on a Schlager music festival held in the amphitheatre, with the

main protagonist being Heino, one of the stars of such genres as Schlager and Volksmusik. In the episode, he explains his social and family connections with Upper Silesia, which again suggests the existence of a geographical reality reaching way beyond the historical or administrative boundaries of the region. This is further emphasised by the repertoire, which includes songs particularly popular in the region. Most interesting, however, is the imagery. Towards the end of the episode, the viewer can see Heino on stage surrounded by a substantial audience visibly enjoying his show. On the screen behind him, the image of St. Anne Mountain is clearly visible with the words “Mein Heimatland”¹⁵ written in a large font across the middle of the image (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Heino performing in the Opole amphitheatre with Upper Silesian symbols in the background.

Through this, a stage symbolically so important for Polish popular culture becomes, for a short while, connected with its German-Silesian equivalent. Most probably, it is not the case of claiming this space with a pretence to exclusivity, but rather a signal that this can be a space of importance for the German minority as well, and perhaps even a sign of its integration (acceptance?) within the regional and broader Polish context.

Altogether, it can be argued that geographical space is defined in the programme in relation to two levels. The first concerns the broad outline of boundaries designating the focus of attention: this is understood quite extensively and covers the historical regions of Lower and Upper Silesia, even though, as we have seen, the demographic presence of the German minority is much stronger in the latter. As was made clear during the interviews, what matters is the presence of those who feel close to the minority, even if the numbers involved are low. At the same time, however, the horizon is even wider than that, given that the region has long participated in various “networks of exchange” which contributed to perceptions of its geography, and thus placed Silesia on a map reaching well beyond its immediate vicinity. The global aspect is continuously counterbalanced by a firm rootedness in different dimensions of locality. Through the content offered in the discussed documentaries, that territory is filled by specific locations, resulting in the creation of a detailed map (at once both real and symbolic)

consisting of cities, towns, and villages but also cultural institutions, landscapes, and other spaces of importance for the minority. The overall balance of reference points seems to be tipped towards an identity based on proximity, yet the more cosmopolitan tones are also relatively prominent.

Concluding remarks

The preceding discussion consisting of the conceptual aspects, profile of the community in focus, and dense media content analysis makes it possible to return to the research question guiding these considerations: how is the multilayered national identity of members of the German minority in Upper Silesia addressed in short documentaries broadcast as a part of “Schlesien Journal”? As previously mentioned, the specific focus was put on two aspects: language and territory.

As we have seen in the respective sections profiling the German minority, aspects related to language and geographical space are among the strongest factors influencing ways of self-identification. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that both are quite prominent in the short documentaries analysed here. Consequently, there is a strong connection between the social reality of the German minority and its media production. Ergo, various languages present in everyday life of the community are used in “Schlesien Journal”, whilst language-related events or initiatives are regularly the focus of individual short documentaries. Similarly, the geographical space where the German minority lives – an aspect of great salience for the shaping of national identity – is thoroughly covered in the programme, with the focus put on specific locations (e.g., towns), cultural initiatives shaped by a given local context, or symbolic spaces.

In relation to language, there is a visible, yet pragmatic, hierarchy. German is clearly the preferred tool of communication, and this principle shapes the production of the programme, but Polish is hardly ignored. At the same time, the way German is represented and discussed conveys the message highlighting the overall significance of it for the community and its internal life (access to culture, social networks etc.), awareness of the historical continuity (language as a part of group and individual heritage), and the pragmatic importance of language (it contributes to both regional and individual prosperity). It is needless to say that neither Polish nor Silesian are approached in a similarly analytical way; they are “just” communication tools, useful in situations when the preferred one is unavailable. Thus, the short documentaries – although acknowledging the existence of the linguistic plurality within the community – make it clear that German should be the leading language. As already suggested, this may not sound as too surprising; nevertheless, it is useful to see in detail how the authors of the analysed audiovisual content navigate the complex linguistic reality of its target community. Taking into account the demographic data suggesting the continuous relative fragility of German as a minority language vis-à-vis Silesian and Polish, it is also plausible to view the efforts made by “Schlesien Journal” to put German in the spotlight as a compensation strategy. With average daily exposure to German being low within the minority, its media try to contribute as much as possible to its increase.

When it comes to the geographical space, the German minority is particularly strong in Upper Silesia, currently spanning two of Poland's administrative regions. In the short documentaries analysed, that area is very well-represented and "Schlesien Journal" can thus be considered as contributing to the creation of its detailed "map", resulting in a network of landmarks further consolidating the minority's local/regional embeddedness, though usually presented as clearly belonging to a broader German cultural realm. Dense references to the diaspora and international connections of the region, in turn, suggest a broader, more cosmopolitan approach to the geographical understanding of identity. Clearly, the boundaries of Upper Silesia do not reach to other continents like the business endeavours of Samuel Fränkel, but the argument is explicit: the identity of the German minority, although firmly anchored in the traditional area of settlement, is open and also built on the understanding of the current and historical connections of the region with even quite distant parts of the world. Such balancing between micro (local/regional) and macro (global/cosmopolitan) levels of identity leaves an intriguing relative gap at the meso-level. Theoretically, this gap could be occupied by documentary content discussing various topics concerning Germany, the minority's kin-state. Such references, however, are not particularly numerous. Their absence leaves open the question of how that aspect of national identity is addressed in "Schlesien Journal". Perhaps the answer lies in the non-documentary content of the programme, which is beyond the scope of this article.

The final point concerns the very format of a documentary. The above considerations seem to confirm several points discussed in the theoretical section. The short documentaries produced by the team responsible for "Schlesien Journal" demonstrate how useful that format can be for minorities. Due to technological developments, it is possible even for smaller communities without substantial infrastructure (like separate television channels etc.) or economic means to adapt this format to their own needs. A short documentary is a particularly interesting genre in this context, as it allows potentially inspiring content to be delivered on a regular basis, as opposed to larger, less-frequent projects. Content-wise, documentaries correspond well with minorities-related topics: the flexibility of the format provides opportunity to address complex issues through the plurality of voices involving various kinds of actors. The possibilities are also broad in relation to language. As shown above, voiceover and subtitling give almost boundless possibilities for establishing the linguistic balance preferred by the creators. The means of artistic expression should not be forgotten either. The creative use of music, camerawork, or archival features can certainly result in the provision of more attractive and engaging content. What this art form certainly needs is more consistent academic scrutiny involving comparative approaches across as many linguistic spheres as possible, and the specific context of the German minority in Upper Silesia could benefit from further research assessing whether the short documentaries discussed here have a real effect on the actual identity of its target audience.

Endnotes

- 1** These measures were overturned by the subsequent Polish government.
- 2** All translations in the article are provided by the author.
- 3** This section covers the situation and profile of “Schlesien Journal” at the time the research on short documentaries was conducted. Notably, in mid-2025, the program underwent changes: it is now produced directly by TVP Opole; its thematic coverage has expanded to include the German minority in the Warmian–Masurian Voivodeship, and it is now also available in the offer of TVP3 Olsztyn and TVP3 Wrocław.
- 4** At the local level, members of the German minority in Upper Silesia are organised in Deutsche Freundschaftskreise (DFK; in English - German Friendship Circles).
- 5** “Towns and People”.
- 6** Painful.
- 7** [A]nd this is the German minority.
- 8** Difficult, difficult.
- 9** School of Machinery Construction and Metallurgy.
- 10** Furniture and goods credit house.
- 11** Bakery.
- 12** Bakery and confectionery shop.
- 13** Local history museum.
- 14** Lower Silesia and Upper Silesia.
- 15** “My homeland” (it needs to be kept in mind that the word “Heimat” has no direct equivalent in English encompassing all aspects of the German original).

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