
**UNITED NATIONS
GROUP OF EXPERTS ON
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES**

13th Meeting of Baltic Division of UNGEGN
Vilnius, 1–2 October 2009

Minority place names in Poland

Prepared by Maciej Zych, Commission on Standardization of Geographical Names Outside
the Republic of Poland

Minority place names in Poland

On 6 January 2005 the Polish Parliament passed an “Act on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional languages”¹. The Act became valid on 1 May 2005. It is the first comprehensive Act in Poland’s post-war history to regulate issues of national, ethnic and language minorities. The Act defines minorities – national and ethnic, as well as the regional language.

A national minority is a group of Polish citizens that meets all of the following requirements:

- is numerically smaller than the rest of the population of Poland
- differs substantially from other citizens by means of language, culture or tradition
- strives to preserve its language, culture or tradition
- is aware of its own historical and national bonds, and aims to express and preserve it
- its ancestors have inhabited the today’s territory of Poland for at least the past 100 years.
- identifies itself with a nation organized in its own state.

An ethnic minority is a group of Polish citizens that meets all of the following requirements:

- is numerically smaller than the rest of the population of Poland
- differs substantially from other citizens by means of language, culture or tradition
- strives to preserve its language, culture or tradition
- is aware of its own historical and national bonds, and aims to express and preserve it
- its ancestors have inhabited the today’s territory of Poland for at least the past 100 years.
- does not identify itself with a nation organized in its own state.

Therefore, the only difference between a national and ethnic minority is the fact that a national minority currently has its own independent state and an ethnic minority does not have one.

The Act mentions national and ethnic minorities that meet the above requirements. There are 9 national minorities: Belorussian, Czech, Lithuanian, German, Armenian, Russian, Slovak, Ukrainian and Jewish; and 4 ethnic minorities – Karait, Lemko (Rusyn), Roma and Tartar.

According to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, a regional language is a language traditionally used within a given territory of a state by nationals of that state who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the state’s population; and it is different from the dialects of official language of that state and from the migrants’ languages. The Act mentions one regional language – Kashubian.

From the viewpoint of geographical names two of this Act’s regulations are important. The first concerns the use of minority languages, the second geographical names in those languages.

The Act lays down that communes where persons belonging to a national, ethnic minority or using a regional language constitute at least 20% of the inhabitants can introduce a minority language as a “supporting language” used in contact with commune organs and in first-instance court procedures. At present only four minorities (Belarusians, Kashubians,

¹ ”Ustawa o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych, oraz o języku regionalnym” Dz.U. 2005 nr 17 poz. 141 (“Act on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional languages” Journal of Laws 2005 No 17 item 141). The English-language version of this Act is available on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration: www.mswia.gov.pl/download.php?s=1&id=2327.

Lithuanians and Germans) account for at least 20% of the inhabitants of 51 communes, among which 28 introduced supporting languages by 20 September 2008²:

- Belarusian in Hajnówka urban commune, Narewka and Orla communes in Podlaskie Voivodship
- Kashubian in Parchowo and Sierakowice communes in Pomorskie Voivodship
- Lithuanian in Puńsk commune in Podlaskie Voivodship
- German in 22 communes of Opolskie Voivodship: Biała, Bierawa, Chrzastowice, Dobrodzień, Dobrzeń Wielki, Głogówek, Izbicko, Jemielnica, Kolonowskie, Komprachcice, Lasowice Wielkie, Leśnica, Murów, Prószków, Radłów, Reńska Wieś, Strzeleczyki, Tarnów Opolski, Turawa, Ujazd, Walce, Zębowice.

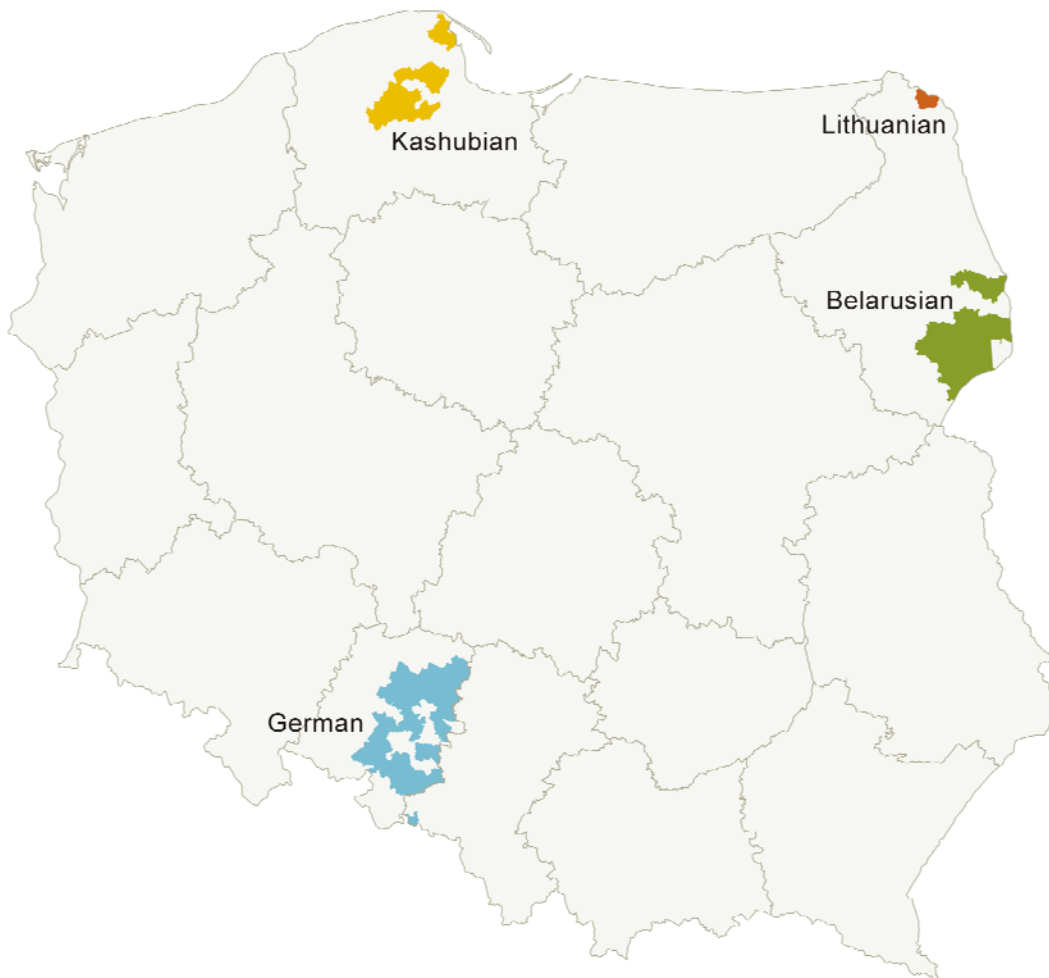


Fig. 1. Communes where persons belonging to a national, ethnic minority or using a regional language constitute at least 20% of the inhabitants

² According to “Urzędowy Rejestr Gmin, w których jest używany język pomocniczy” (“Official Register of the Communes where a supporting language is used”) provided by Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration: <http://www.mswia.gov.pl/download.php?s=4&id=1416>.

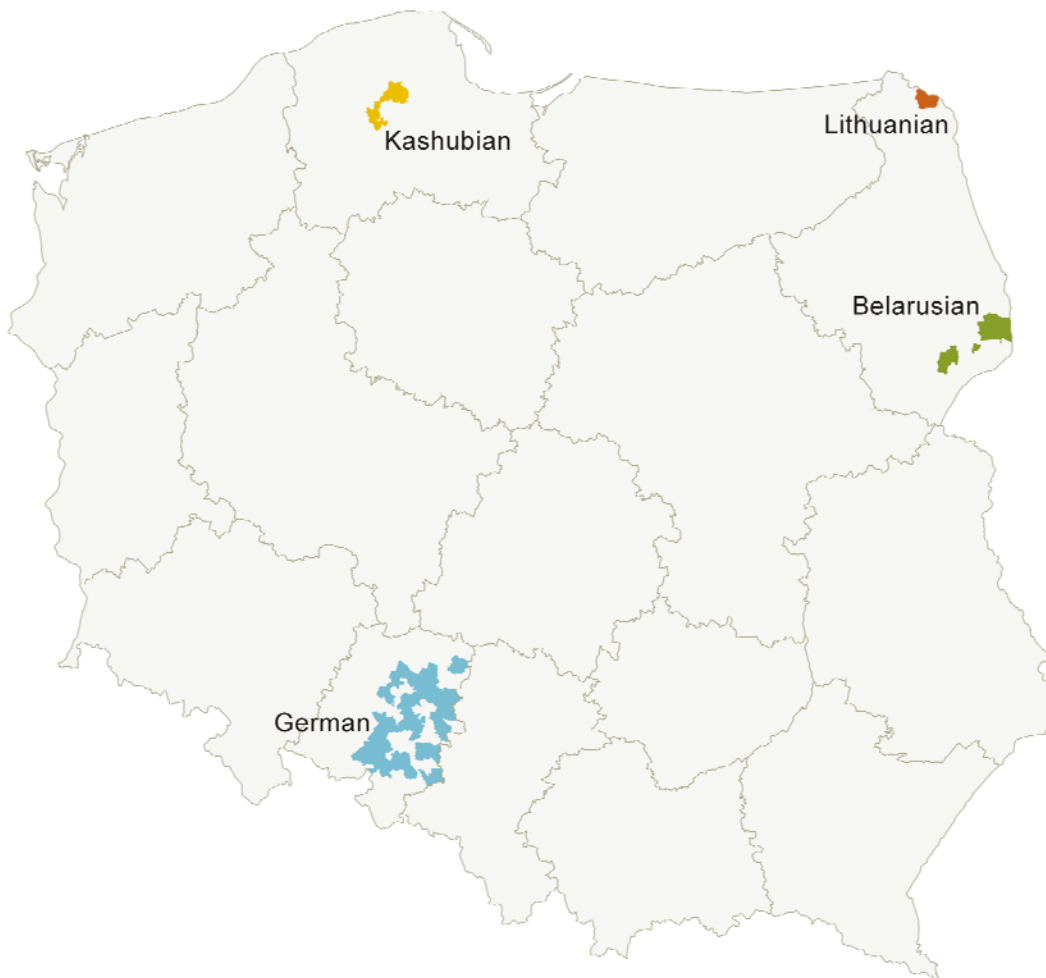


Fig. 2. Communes where supporting languages were introduced

The Act also lays down that traditional names in a minority language for localities, physiographic objects and streets may be used as “additional names” alongside geographic names established in the Polish language. The names of uninhabited localities, physiographic objects as well as streets, squares etc. in minority languages may be established only for communes in which the minority constitutes at least 20% of the inhabitants. In the case of inhabited localities, minority names may be set also for communes that do not satisfy the quantitative requirement of minorities residing therein (20%). For such places an additional name in the minority language may be introduced if in consultations more than a half of its residents were in favor of the establishment of an additional name. Names of localities and physiographic objects in minority languages may be introduced throughout a whole commune or for parts of it.

Names in minority languages may not be used independently and must also appear following the official name in Polish. Contradictory to names in Polish, names in minority languages are not official names but only “additional names” (“auxiliary names”). Names in minority languages may not refer to names between 1933 and 1945 granted by the Third German Reich or the Soviet Union. The aim of this limitation is to avoid the return to names introduced during the Second World War by German and Soviet occupying authorities, and to avoid the return to names introduced by Germans after 1933 when in what was then Germany’s eastern territory, the geographic names of non-Germanic origin were Germanized.

All names proposed by Commune Councils must receive the approval of the Commission for Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects.

By 20 September 2009 314 geographical names in minority language were introduced: 197 German names for localities in 17 communes in Opolskie and Śląskie Voivodships, 86 Kashubian names for localities in 2 communes in Pomorskie Voivodship, 30 Lithuanian names for localities in 1 commune in Podlaskie Voivodship and 1 Lemko name in commune in Małopolskie Voivodship³. Several other communes also intend to introduce names in a minority language, with administration procedures currently under way to introduce these names.

Additional names in minority languages also appear on road signs, due to multilevel and complicated procedures however the introduction of these signs is a long process. In Radłów commune for example road signs in the German language were put up in August 2008. In Puńsk commune they were put up in July 2009. Approved place names are also starting to appear on maps published by private companies. At present they are not shown on topographic maps in Poland. The reason for this situation is the lack of funds for actualizing existing topographic maps and for preparing new ones.

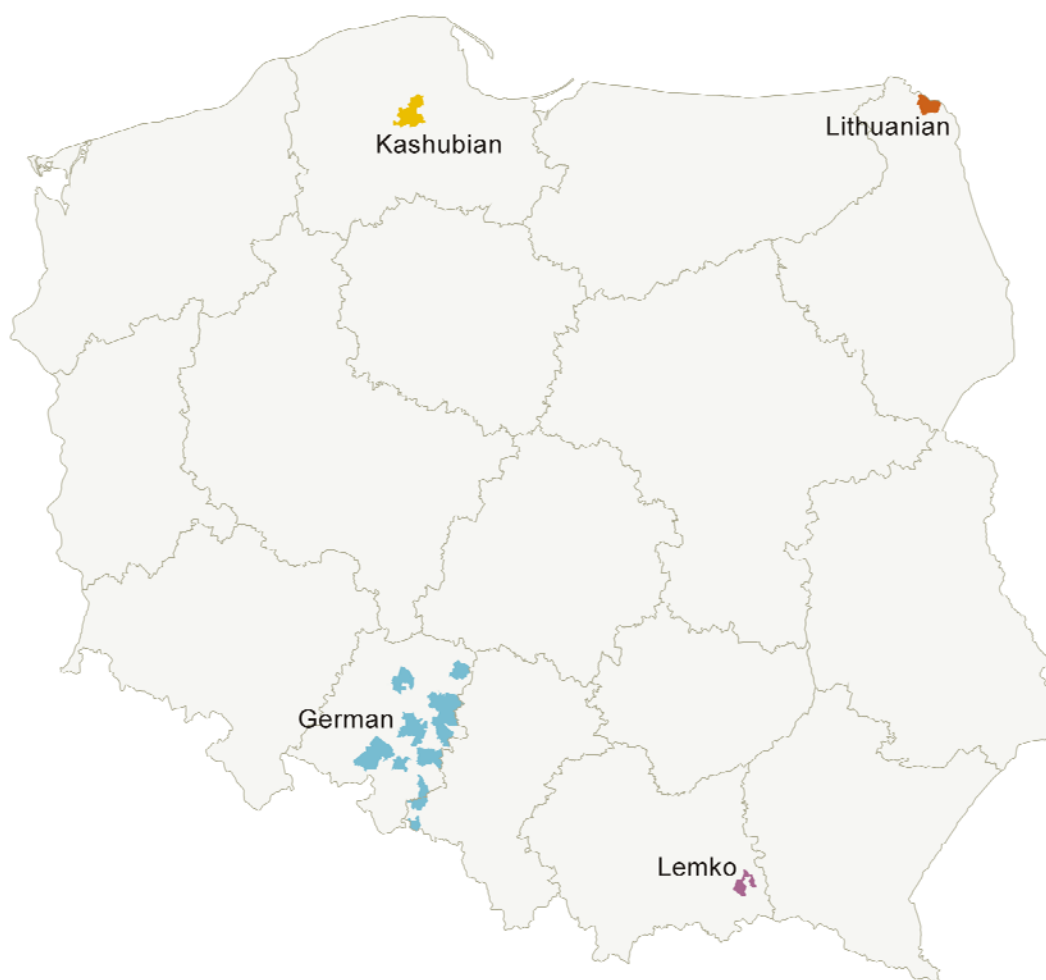


Fig. 3. Communes where additional names were introduced

³ According to “Rejestr gmin na których obszarze używane są nazwy w języku mniejszości” (“Register of the communes where place-names in minority language are used”) provided by Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration: <http://www.mswia.gov.pl/download.php?s=4&id=1417>.

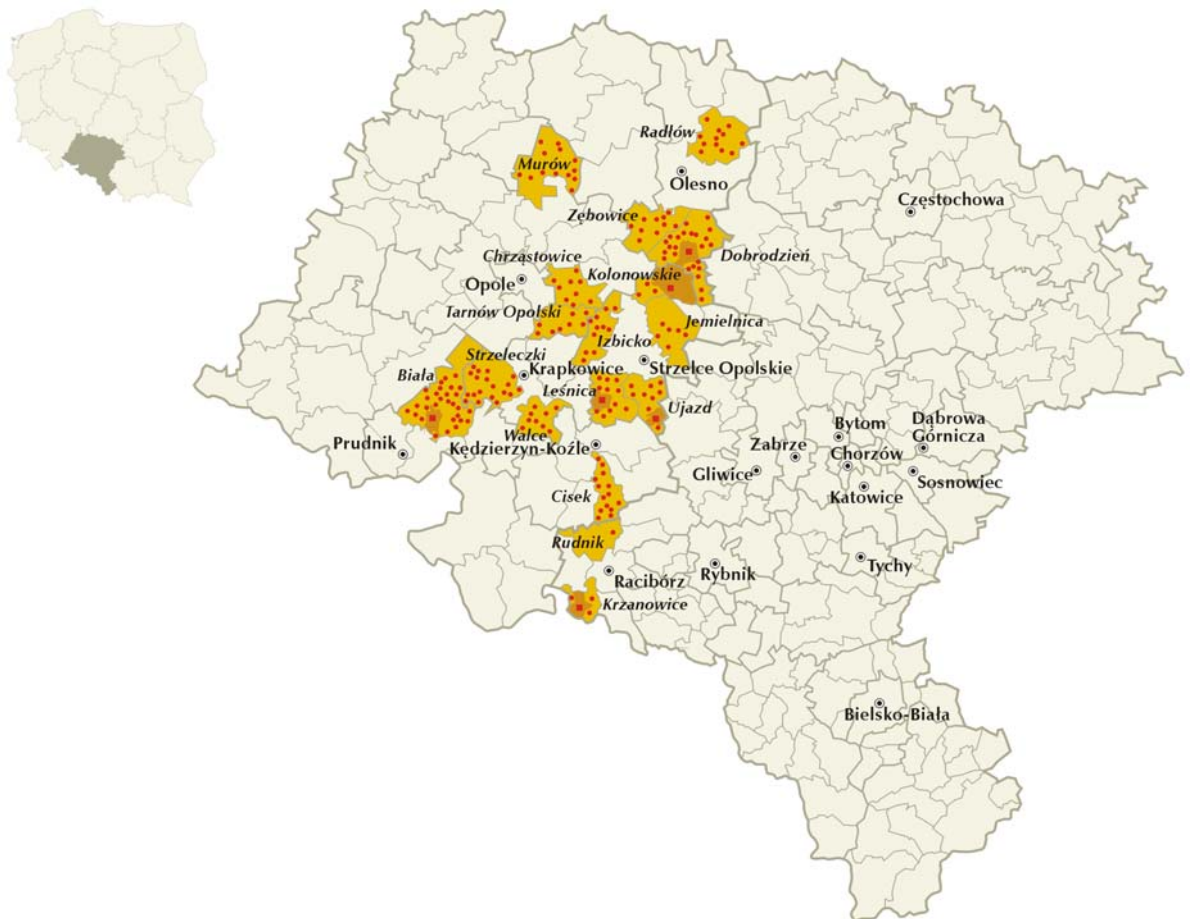


Fig. 4. Localities for which the additional German names were introduced



Fig. 5. Localities for which the additional Kashubian names were introduced

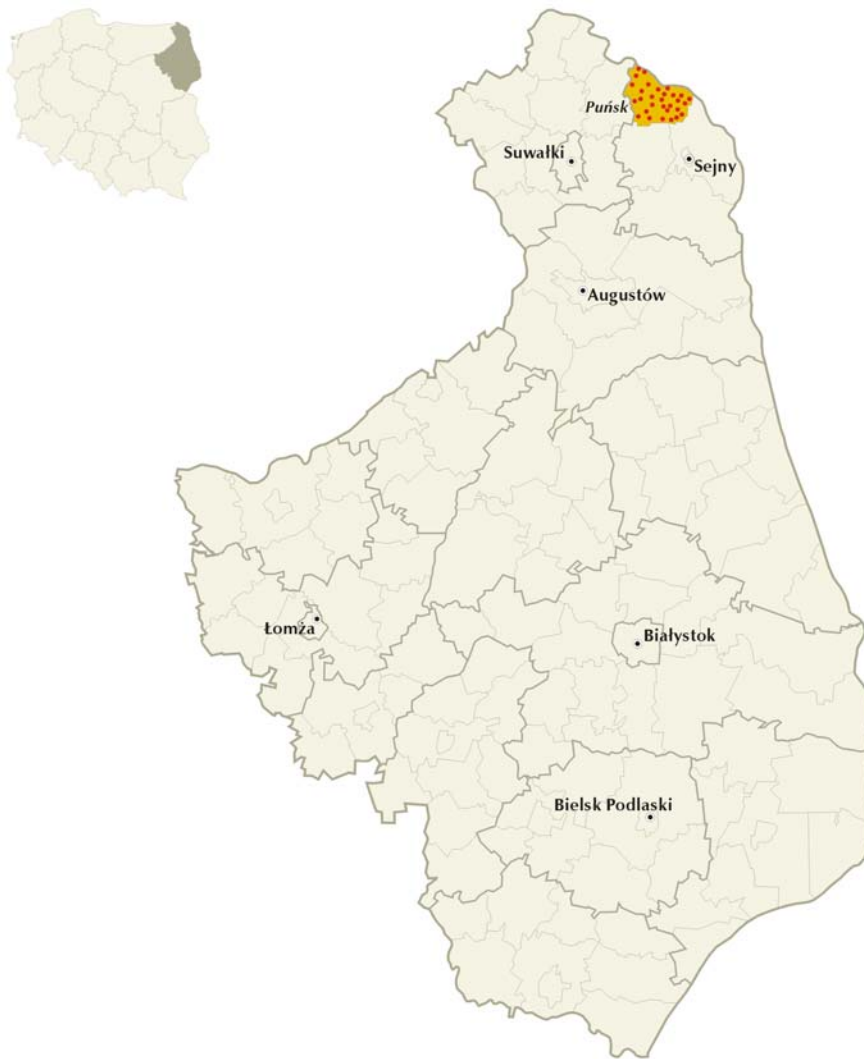


Fig. 6. Localities for which the additional Lithuanian names were introduced



Fig. 7. Localities for which the additional Lemko names were introduced