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Languages in Competition?

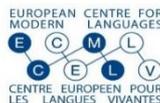
Immigration, Education, and Linguistic Diversity - Lessons (and Challenges) from Polish Schools

ECML-EC Colloquium, Graz 4 December 2025

‘Multiple voices in the classroom: Harnessing the power of regional and minority languages in secondary education’



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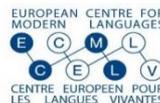
Introduction

From Homogeneity to Multilingualism

- Polish (secondary) schools have undergone **unprecedented linguistic change** since 1989.
- For decades, schooling operated on the assumption of **Polish linguistic homogeneity**; other languages were treated only as foreign-language subjects.
- Needs of **minorities** (Belarusian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, German, Lemko) were often marginalized, while **Kashubian** was framed as a dialect or folklore rather than a legitimate language.
- By the 2020s, secondary schools became **complex multilingual environments**, shaped by:
 - enduring presence and legal rights of national and regional languages;
 - **large-scale migration**, especially after 2014 and 2022, bringing diverse linguistic repertoires and interrupted schooling.
- These strands now interact within the **same classrooms, teachers, and assessment systems**, despite being treated separately in policy discourse.



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Key Questions and Central Argument

- Does rising migrant-language visibility **threaten RMLs**?
 - Do foreign languages, RMLs, and migrant languages **compete for hours, prestige, or resources**?
 - How does linguistic diversity intersect with **stigma, xenophobia, and hate speech**?
 - What policies can **normalize and value** linguistic diversity in secondary schools?
- **Core argument:**
 - **Languages do not compete - structures and ideologies do.**
 - Competition arises from **funding models, rigid curricula, political pressures, and monolingual norms.**
 - When these are addressed through **flexible curricula, teacher training, recognition of linguistic rights, and intercultural education**, multilingual secondary schools function as **productive, inclusive spaces**, not sites of conflict.



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Growth of Linguistic Diversity Through Migration

- Secondary schools now host **unprecedented linguistic diversity** Migrant groups include:
 - **Ukrainian refugees** (post-2022, disrupted schooling);
 - **Belarusian political migrants** (post-2020);
 - **children of labour migrants** from Asia and the Middle East;
 - **re-emigrants from Western Europe** (bilingual, but lacking academic Polish);
 - **multicultural-family students** using multiple home languages.
- Languages spoken: **Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian, Armenian, Georgian, Vietnamese, English, Tamil, Arabic**, and more.
- Secondary-level demands make linguistic gaps critical – e.g., **subject-specific terminology** essential for success.



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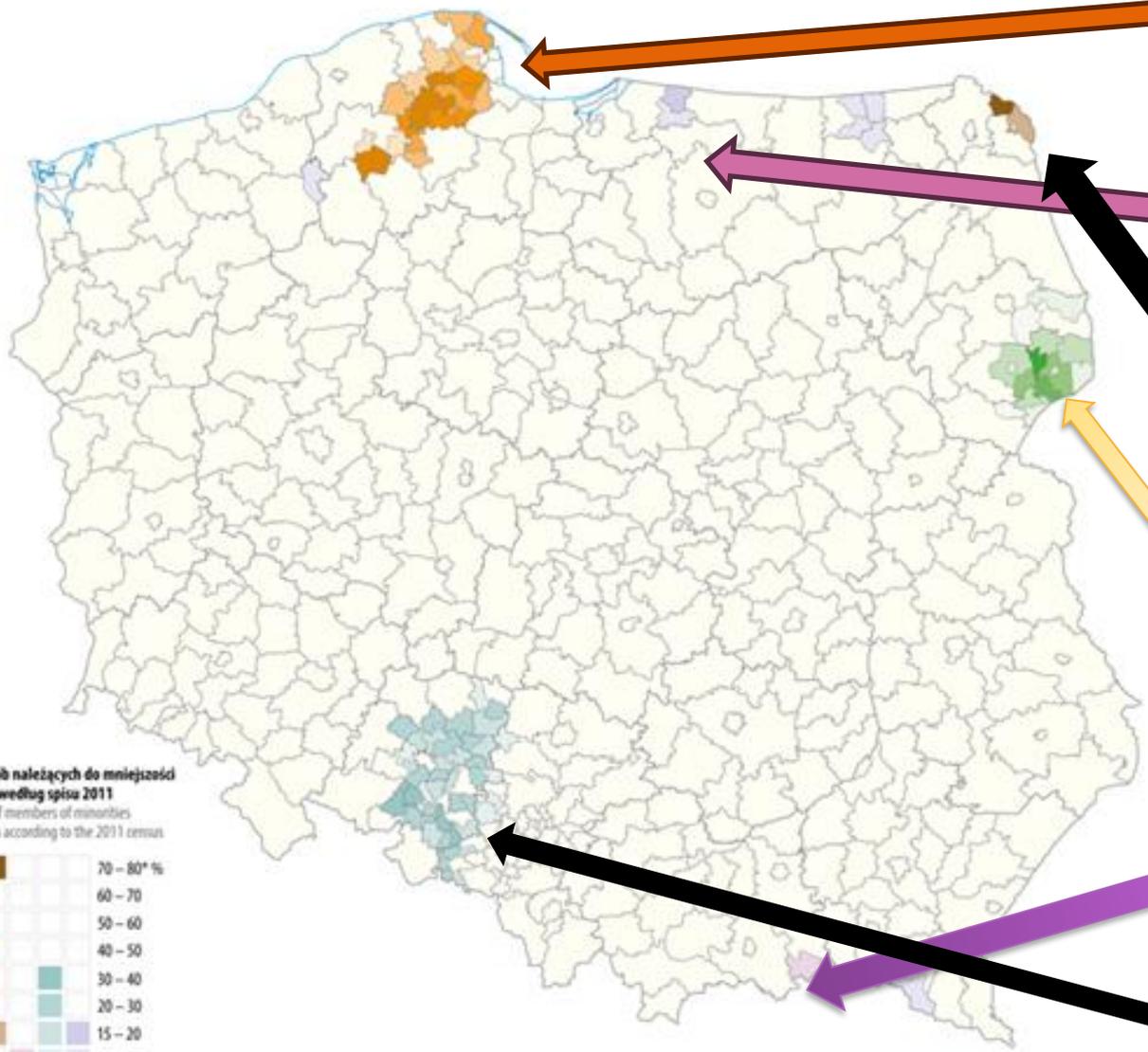
Longstanding Presence of Minority and Regional Languages

- Secondary schools serve **longstanding national minorities** (Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, German) and the **Kashubian regional-language community** (Kashubian holding a **unique legal status** as a *regional language*, shaping how schools implement it)
- Despite this heritage, provision is limited: **700+ primary schools** teach minority languages, but only **19 secondary schools** do—just **5** with strong bilingual/minority-medium models
- Kashubian example: **400+ primary schools** offer it, yet only a few *licea* continue it, with **no bilingual/immersion options**.
- Result: **discontinuity at the secondary level**, contributing to language attrition during crucial stages of adolescent identity formation.

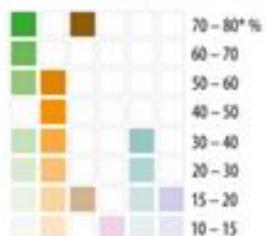


National/ethnic minorities and regional language groups – distribution in space

- Kashubian
- Ukrainian
- Lithuanian
- Belarusian
- Lemko
- German



Odszetek osób należących do mniejszości w gminach według spisu 2011
 Percentage of members of minorities in communes according to the 2011 census



- ukraiński / Ukrainian
- niemiecki / German
- litewski / Lithuanian
- białoruski / Belarusian
- lemski (uczyński) / Lemko
- kaszubijski / Kashubian
- śląski / Silesian

*Przebiegi demograficzne kwadratowe



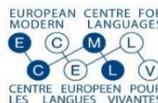
Źródło: M. W. Salarz (red.), 2018, Geograficzno-polityczny atlas Polski. Polska w świecie współczesnym, Warszawa, s. 196

Legal Foundations and Educational Philosophy

- **2005 Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language** guarantees:
 - the **right to learn** a minority/regional language;
 - the **right to be taught in** that language;
 - the **right to cultural and identity-focused education.**
- These provisions signal **democratic maturity** and state commitment to linguistic pluralism
- (Kymlicka's view) **multicultural citizenship** requires strong institutional support for minority languages; especially at the **secondary level**, where identity and aspirations solidify.



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Models of Instruction

- Three models in Polish secondary schools:
 - **Bilingual schools** – subjects taught in Polish + minority language (e.g., Belarusian–Polish, Ukrainian–Polish).
 - **Minority-medium schools** – most subjects taught in the minority language (e.g., Lithuanian in Puńsk).
 - **Additional-instruction schools** – minority language taught only as a subject.
- **Kashubian model differs:**
 - Kashubian offered almost exclusively as a **subject**, not a medium of teaching.
 - Results in a “**weak bilingual**” model: limited fluency and no academic use.
 - Symbolically positions Kashubian as **supplementary**, not an equal school language.



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Cultural and Identity-Building Functions

- Minority and regional-language secondary schools act as **cultural and identity centers**, not only teaching institutions.
- Common activities: **choirs, theater groups, exhibitions, cross-border partnerships.**
- Kashubian schools also:
 - run **craft workshops** and regional-literature projects;
 - support participation in the **Kashubian Language competitions**;
 - strengthen community cultural life.
- Kashubian schooling helps **challenge stigma** and the view of Kashubian as a “non-prestigious” home code; yet **internalized stigma persists**, shaping adolescents’ motivation and sense of linguistic legitimacy.



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Ideologies Shaping Kashubian-as-Regional-Language Schooling

- **Kashubian as a collateral language** = Kashubian is often viewed as [too] **close to Polish**, leading to its framing as a dialect rather than a full language.
- Consequences of this perception:
 - Seen as “**easy**” and of low academic value.
 - **Heritage speakers feel embarrassed** using it formally.
 - Teachers rely on **Polish norms**, reducing linguistic authenticity.
 - Treated by students as a **low-stakes elective**, not a serious subject.
- Similar challenges appear in other contexts where proximity to a dominant language **undermines legitimacy and prestige**



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Systemic Barriers to Secondary-Level Continuity

- Minority and regional-language secondary schools face persistent obstacles:
 - **Teacher shortages**, especially in Kashubian and Belarusian;
 - **Lack of textbooks**, including updated Kashubian materials for older students;
 - **Demographic decline** in rural minority areas;
 - **Political pressures**, which may threaten school autonomy;
 - **Rigid curriculum structures**, making it difficult to integrate bilingual models.
- Kashubian case again shows a critical pattern: strong primary-level provision combined with weak secondary-level continuity leads to attrition and declining proficiency.



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Migrant Students in Secondary Schools: Linguistic, Educational, and Social Challenges

Linguistic Profiles and Educational Needs

- many migrant learners enter secondary school without literacy in their home languages or with interrupted schooling.
- subgroups:
 - **refugees**, often with trauma and gaps in schooling;
 - **labour migrants' children**, who may have partial exposure to Polish but lack academic registers;
 - Polish **re-emigrants**, who speak Polish informally but have never learned subject-specific vocabulary in Polish.
- These distinctions matter profoundly in secondary education, where specialized terminology is essential for academic success.
- Translanguaging



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Teacher Training

- Secondary teacher - trained as subject specialists - rarely receive training in:
 - second-language acquisition;
 - multilingual pedagogies;
 - trauma-informed approaches;
 - assessment of multilingual learners.
- This lack of preparation feeds monolingual expectations and reinforces assimilationist norms



Are Languages Competing?

Rethinking the Competition Narrative

Structural Sources of the Competition Myth

Perceived competition arises from:

- rigid allocation of teaching hours;
- insufficient funding for bilingual models;
- teacher shortages;
- political controversies;
- ideological hierarchies privileging Polish.

The Kashubian example illustrates how elective, low-prestige models foster the belief that regional languages “steal time” from more “useful” subjects.

Evidence of Coexistence in Practice

In many schools, students learn

- Polish as the primary medium;
- English as a compulsory foreign language;
- another foreign language (German, French, Spanish);
- a minority/regional language (Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Kashubian);
- home languages maintained informally among peers.

Minority-language secondary schools demonstrate that multiple languages can coexist productively when institutional support is consistent.



From Zero-Sum Logic to Multilingual Educational Design

Linguistic competition disappears when:

- curricula allow flexible combinations of subjects;
- teachers are trained to work in multilingual environments;
- minority and migrant languages are normalized, not exceptional;
- RMLs -such as Kashubian- are positioned as legitimate academic resources.



Policy Directions

Language Policy as a Tool for Combating Hate Speech and Stigma

- secondary schools shape adolescents' worldviews
- policies that visibly recognize linguistic diversity (signage, events, elective courses, bilingual materials) may reduce stigma toward both migrant and minority/regional languages.
- Kashubian programs illustrate how school-based normalization can counteract decades of stigmatization.

Empowering Teachers - key systemic needs:

- certification in teaching Polish as a second language;
- training in multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies;
- trauma-informed methods for refugee-background students;
- sociolinguistic awareness to counter ideologies of inferiority (crucial for Kashubian).

Ensuring Strong Secondary-Level Pathways for RMLs - to secure linguistic continuity:

- bilingual models expanded;
- textbooks + digital resources developed;
- RML teachers need stable career paths;
- RML programs shielded from political volatility.
- These principles apply equally to Kashubian, where parental demand is strong but institutional support remains insufficient.



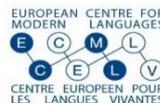
Lessons from and Challenges for Poland's Secondary Schools

Lessons

- Multilingual education strengthens social cohesion.
- Minority and regional-language schools offer models of inclusive multilingualism.
- Integration requires scaffolding, not assimilation.
- Language policy can actively combat prejudice.
- Flexible curricular structures unlock linguistic coexistence.
- Kashubian case demonstrates that revitalization relies on legitimacy, continuity, and community cooperation.

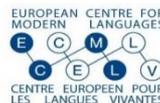
Challenges

- Political interference endangers linguistic rights.
- Preparatory classes may create parallel, segregated tracks.
- Underfunded RML programs foster perceptions of competition.
- Weak elective models (e.g., Kashubian) limit proficiency and prestige.
- Monolingual teaching ideologies hinder both minority and migrant learners.



Conclusions

- Polish secondary schools are (to various extent) multilingual and rapidly changing.
- Minority rights, regional-language revitalization, and migration intersect but need not conflict.
- Kashubian and other minority programs show that coexistence of languages works with solid institutional support.
- Main obstacles are structural: rigid curricula, weak teacher training, funding gaps, and monolingual ideologies.
- When these are fixed, linguistic diversity becomes a resource.
- Poland illustrates that linguistic rights, migrant integration, and regional-language revitalization can reinforce one another in inclusive education.





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Thank you for your attention!

Dziękuję za uwagę!

Merci de votre attention!

Vielen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!

Dzãkujã za Waji òbacht!

Дякую за вашу увагу!

Ačĩũ už dẽmesj!

Дзякуй за ўвагу!



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Questions for Discussion

1. Multilingual System Design

- Which concrete reforms - such as flexible curricula, differentiated language pathways, or specialized teacher training - seem most effective in supporting both minority-language continuity and migrant student integration at the secondary level?

2. Rights and Cohesion

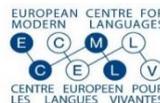
- How can authorities balance the linguistic rights of historical minorities with the inclusion needs of migrant-background students when resources, instructional time, and teacher expertise are limited?

3. Reducing Linguistic Stigma

- What proven strategies in secondary schools - such as anti-bias programs, translanguaging pedagogies, or whole-school intercultural initiatives - most effectively counteract linguistic prejudice and build positive relations among students from diverse language backgrounds?



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