

SECURING WAGES AND BREAD IN LUSATIA

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The self-confidence of Sorbian entrepreneurs has grown. It is becoming increasingly commonplace to publicly declare one's Sorbian nationality with bilingual signage on the company gate. Some newspaper advertisements appear in Sorbian or are bilingual, and Sorbian is also spoken at economic policy events. Young entrepreneurs are more conscious of this issue. The world is their oyster. They study and train elsewhere and return home with a new perspective – and with the experience that national traditions are also lived out in the economy abroad. These have existed in Lusatia for generations; they just need to be cultivated more consciously in some places. This motivates Sorbian craftsmen and tradesmen to continue supporting Sorbian cultural life in the villages with sponsorship or donations, for example the annual autumn concerts of the Domowina or the Europeada, the European Football Championship of the autochthonous minorities held in Lusatia in 2012.

Commitment to Sorbian roots is one thing, but the conditions of the free market are another. The wishful thinking at the time of reunification that local authorities in the Sorbian region should give greater consideration to the minority when awarding contracts is restricted by law. Sorbian companies also need German contracts; they cannot survive on the Sorbian market alone. Like any other commercial enterprise, they must therefore distinguish themselves through quality and reliability.

The Association of Sorbian Craftsmen and Entrepreneurs was founded in 1997 to better represent Sorbian economic interests. There had been no association with this focus before. The Sorbian economic associations that emerged at the end of the 19th century were agricultural or sales cooperatives. This is because the Sorbs were mainly an agricultural people, which is the reason for their strong attachment to their homes and farms to this day. One of the predecessors of the entrepreneurs' association was the Sorbian Association in Bautzen (Serbski Zwjazk w Budyšinje), founded in Crostwitz/Chróścicy in 1918. It defined its goal as 'helping Wendish workers to earn a sufficient wage at home in Lusatia and enabling them to settle in their homeland ...'¹. This demand is still relevant today.

The business association has more than 60 members, ranging from sole traders to medium-sized companies. The association is politically and religiously neutral. For many years, supporting and strengthening each other in order to secure wages and livelihoods in Lusatia was not just a question of economic survival for the Sorbs. A lack of jobs and training places led to migration, especially among younger compatriots, who were then lost to the Sorbian people as speakers of the language. Things

¹ Musiat, Siegmund: Sorbische/Wendische Vereine 1716 – 1937. Ein Handbuch. Domowina-Verlag Bautzen 2001, P. 351

are very different now. When young Sorbs leave their homeland to find an apprenticeship, it is usually because they have specific professional qualifications. This is because there are now more training places than apprentices in this region. No one would have thought that possible at the end of the 1990s.

A bilingual apprenticeship programme, as sought by Domowina and the employers' association for years, is difficult to implement in vocational schools, but works quite well in training companies. However, teaching Sorbian cannot be the responsibility of employers. For some time now, the employers' association has been cooperating with the Sorbian secondary school in Ralbitz/Ralbicy to interest apprentices in Sorbian crafts. In 2012, a bus trip was organised for the first time to companies offering a variety of professions, from manual labour to high technology. The students realised that the Sorbian language is not a remnant of folk culture, but is alive and well in the economy. This was precisely the topic of the Domowina conference 'The Sorbian Language and the Economy' in 2006. Project days, student internships and holiday work show Sorbian students career prospects in Lusatia and thus in their homeland.

In 2000, the association joined Domowina. This gave the umbrella organisation of the Sorbs more competence in economic matters. Since then, there has been an independent branch of the business association in Lower Lusatia. Since the EU's eastward expansion in 2004, the association has regularly participated in business meetings in Poland, maintained contacts with Czechia and the Slovenian minority in Austria, and travelled on excursions to the Baltic states. Their native language makes communication easier for the Sorbs.

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