



The Path to the "Serbski Sejm"

Chronology

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The Sorbs developed their aspirations for autonomy and self-determination above all in phases of historical climaxes, after wars, crises and social upheavals, including the caesuras of 1918/19 (Weimar Republic), 1945-1948 and in part also 1989/90 (political change).

To date, the Sorbs have not succeeded in establishing a democratic political representation that would unite all Sorbs and represent them both internally and externally.

During the revolutionary events of **1848**, the "Union of Sorbian/Wendish Associations" is established in Bautzen.

1912: Domowina is founded as the umbrella organisation for Sorbian associations, but never unites all Sorbs or their associations.

1918: "Wendish National Committee" under Arnošt Bart demands rights of self-determination or political autonomy for Sorbs. **1919:** He establishes the (Sorbian) "Lusatian People's Party". In the same year he travels to Paris with a delegation to achieve self-government rights for Sorbs at the Versailles peace negotiations - with reference to the 14-point programme of US President Thomas Woodrow Wilson. The efforts remain unsuccessful.

1936 - 1945: After the National Socialists seize power, the Sorbian language, associations and finally all cultural and political activities are banned, committed pastors and teachers are expelled, some are imprisoned or sent to concentration camps. After the "final victory" all Sorbs were to be resettled as "leaderless working people".

1945: Re-foundation of Domowina; in the course of the Saxon "Law for the Protection of the Rights of the Sorbian Population", the Saxon Landtag granted Domowina the status of "corporation under public law" in 1948; but Domowina was brought into line with the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, so the status remained, but existed until the end of the GDR.

After an enthusiastic new beginning in **1989**, especially in the context of the oppositional Serbska narodna zhromadźizna (Sorbian National Assembly), demands are made for, among other things, a democratic Sorbian people's representation. The opposition does not succeed in taking over the Domowina chairmanship. In the **1990** board elections, the Domowina leadership used unfair practices to prevent the opposition candidate. The opposition movement dissolves. The Domowina association partially renews itself in terms of personnel, but remains true to its structures and methods, blocking all reforms and efforts towards self-determination. The cohesion of the Sorbs visibly weakens.

1991: From the state's point of view, a fundamental process of self-purification of the Domowina has not taken place, so the dependent "Foundation for the Sorbian People" is set up as an extended arm of the German state with minority participation by Sorbian forces; the public authorities always retain the majority.

27 March 2005: Founding meeting of the "Wendish People's Party" (later "Lusatian Alliance", Chairman: Hanzo Wylem-Keł - a revival of the 1919 "Lusatian People's Party",

which is later banned by the Nazis). The Domowina is critical of the party; party founder Hannes Kell argues: "Many Sorbs have long felt that they are not sufficiently represented by the Domowina".

The Domowina association cannot claim sole representation; there is no legal regulation legitimising it as the sole political contact for Sorbian affairs; there is no force democratically elected by all Sorbs that could bring together the Sorbian regions, institutions, associations, denominations or political camps to reconcile differences and positions. State authorities paradoxically only accept the Domowina association.

Intra-Sorbian conflicts increase, especially between the Domowina leadership and the foundation; Domowina-Vereine demands more decision-making powers, although at the same time it cancels its status as a "corporation under public law" for dubious reasons and registers itself as an association in the register of associations.

In **2007** at the latest, some federal authorities report strong reservations about the practice of promoting Sorbian culture because of unregulated relationships, parallel structures between the foundation and the Domowina association etc. The Court of Auditors criticises serious abuses in the handling of public funds.

On the part of the state, various expert opinions are commissioned (Völkerrechtler: Prof. P. Pernthaler, Innsbruck, Prof. M. Kotzur, Leipzig, later Prof. St. Oeter, Hamburg). Prof. Matthias Vogt (Institut für kult. Infrastruktur, Görlitz) is commissioned to evaluate the funding practice. (Part I: Analysis of the current situation of the institutions funded by the Foundation for the Sorbian People).

All the expert reports agree that "Sorbs are an autochthonous people that can invoke ... the right of self-determination.... In relation to the people of the Federal Republic of Germany as a whole, they are a partial state people." Above all, a "private-law association is the least self-determination-adequate form of organisation for a representation of the Sorbs. Even the private-law foundation does not provide a membership-structured, democratically legitimised representation of the Sorbian people." In Part II: "Recommendations for Strengthening the Sorbian Minority through the Creation of a Coordinated Cluster of Self-Government, Cooperation, Projects and Institutions", Vogt criticises: "the current Sorbian institutional cluster is highly dysfunctional." As a result of all the expert opinions, the federal government convenes working groups in **2011**. In its "Final Report", the group "Corporation under Public Law" proposes two models for reorganising the political representation of the interests of the Sorbian/Wendish people.

In **2010**, the members of the Bundestag C. Behm, V. Beck and M. Lazar (parliamentary group BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN) also emphasise in a small question: "It is undisputed that the Sorbian/Wendish people as a national minority in Germany are entitled to partial rights of self-determination. " and refer to mentioned expert opinions (Prof. M. Kotzur, Prof. P. Pernthaler); they show that the political and legal representation of the Sorbs/Wends is still not regulated 20 years after the political change of 1989. As a result, the federal government

promised to discuss the working group results and to decide on necessary measures, but it has failed to do so. All expert opinions and reform plans are shelved.

14 May 2011: The initiative for a democratically legitimised Sorbian people's representation (spokesperson for Upper Lusatia: Dr. Měrćin Wałda; for Lower Lusatia: Michael Apel, then Hanzo Wylem-Keł) is formed in Nebelschütz and calls for the "Serbski Sejm" for the first time; it meets monthly.

The initiative invites to democratic discourse; on **26 January 2013** it organises a round table (Schmochtitz). Other round tables, closed meetings or media campaigns follow; Domowina Association refuses any transparent dialogue. Prominent Lusatian personalities moderate round tables, presentations, forums on the Serbski Sejm (e.g. 7 September 2016, Forum: A Parliament for the Sorbs? Support from Mayor Alexander Ahrens or theatre director Lutz Hillmann (Bautzen).

13 November 2011: The report of the joint working group "Corporation under Public Law", drafted under the direction of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, elaborates on the sovereign rights transferable to the Sorbian people and laments the democratic deficits and the lack of prospects for improvement if the status quo continues.

7 January 2016: Petition for "Serbski Sejm - an equal voice in the concert of the peoples of Europe".

Since **June 2016:** follow advertising campaigns for Serbski Sejm - tour through Lusatia, Facebook, media, flyers, white paper, info table at the 15th Krabat Festival in Wittichenau, etc.

23 August 2016: Prof. Klaus Thielmann, former Minister, speaks out in favour of a democratically legitimised representation of the Sorbs: "Sorbs must finally be able to speak with one voice".

5 September 2016: Info event "Democracy dare - Serbski Sejm" as part of the "1st Bautzen Democracy Weeks".

27 August 2016: "Sorben, Sami und der Fluch der Bodenschätze", Am Krabatstein (Militz Quarry), film evening with discussion, moderated by Mirko Schwanitz, journalist at Deutschlandfunk.

29 August 2016: Róža Domašcyna, Sorbian poet, Bautzen: "It is always better to represent yourself!"

29 August 2016: "Self-determination now! - For a Parliament of the Sorbs/Wends", demand at state parliaments in Saxony and Brandenburg to initiate a legislative procedure to create the legal framework for "Serbski Sejm".

31 August 2016: Wolfgang Kraus, "Krabat" Ambassador of Upper Lusatia, speaks out in favour of a self-determined parliament for the Sorbs.

5 September 2016: Bautzen Democracy Weeks - "Democracy dare: Serbski Sejm - for the first time a parliament of the Sorbs and Wends".

September 2016: Strategy paper - education policy: "Position paper on the critical situation of Sorbian language education", Dr Handrij Kluge, Dresden association "Stup dale".

September 2016: Initiative stimulates discussion on Rada starostow (Council of Elders), as mentor of the pre-parliament, in addition draft statute.

Discussion on financing volunteer work via private and corporate sponsorship as well as democracy project-supporting foundations and crowdfunding platforms, in order to dispense with state funding.

3 December 2016: Meeting of the candidates of the "Rada Starostow" (Council of Elders) and members of the initiative group "Serbski Sejm".

7 December 2016: Offer of talks to governments and parliamentary parties at federal and state level, conception of a Serbski Sejm.

January 2017: Online petition for a Sorbian/Wendish parliament with the motto "Self-determination now!"; 1300 signatures by the end of the year.

14 January 2017: I. Sorbian Education Summit, Steinhaus Bautzen Steinhaus; goals: Preservation of the Sorbian language, adult education, establishment of an Upper Lusatian School for Language and Culture, immediate programme for training "lateral entrants" of Sorbian teachers, student scholarships for cultural and study exchanges in neighbouring countries, foundation of a university institution of the Sorbs/Wends, cultural and educational autonomy - Serbski Sejm.

28 January 2017: Hoyerswerda Castle: Ceremonial founding event of the non-party Sorbian/Wendish Council of Elders (Rada Starostow; 20 men and women) - motto: "The next step towards the election and constitution of the pre-parliament "Serbski Sejm".

28 February 2017: "Initiative - Serbski Sejm" as guest of the Brandenburg parliamentary groups (Die LINKEN, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN and SPD), all parliamentary groups affirm basic right of the Sorbs to a parliament.

23 March 2017: Initiative with parliamentary groups of the CDU, the BÜNDNIS90/GREENS and the LEFT.

8 April 2017: Nebelschütz: Joint closed meeting of the Initiative and the Council of Elders on the election call, preparation of the electoral list, postal ballot; talks with Saxony, Brandenburg and the Federation on the State Treaty urged.

4 May 2017: Letter from the SPD party representative on behalf of the SPD candidate for chancellor, Martin Schulz, to Dr Měrcin Wałda, spokesperson for the initiative: "Martin Schulz is following the initiative with great interest".

9 August 2017: Smy e.V. (Association for the Promotion of the Serbski Sejm) submits funding application for election of the Sorbian/Wendish Parliament, application rejected by the Foundation Board.

13 - 14 April 2018: European Free Alliance Congress, Landshut, approx. 200 representatives of over 40 member parties and youth organisations support Serbski Sejm.

1 May 2018: Call for elections to Serbski Sejm - spring festival in Krabatmühle Schwarzkollm.

29 June 2018: Bautzen District Council rejects offer of talks by the Sejm initiative, especially from the CDU ranks: "Serbski sejm must stay outside" (Sächsisch Zeitung).

2 July 2018: Council of Elders informs Domowina Federal Board about Sejm elections, Domowina firmly rejects them, does everything to prevent the election; Domowina Chair D. Statnik writes to all boards and associations to boycott the election.

29 September 2018: Workshop, Catholic Parish Centre Nebelschütz: Smy e.V. presents candidates, pre-election party with live music.

3 November 2018: Media echo: "First Sorbs Parliament "Serbski Sejm" elected. National rebirth of the Sorbs, the smallest Slavic people - long oppressed, now they elected their first people's representation" (taz et al.).

Chief Electoral Officer Dr. Hagen Domaschke informs: 1282 registered voters, 908 returned election letters, "15 Lower Sorbian and 19 Upper Sorbian candidates were elected"; "International election observers: European Free Alliance - Marta Binka (Upper Silesia), Dr. Cristian Kollmann (South Tyrol); politicians from the Czech Republic - Jaroslav Količek (MEP), Jaroslav Růžička, Petr Brázda; politicians from Poland - Bogusław Wontow (retired Sejm deputy), Adam Maciag (former mayor Namisław, deputy voivode), Anna Ziemkiewicz.

9 October 2018: "MDR coverage of the Sorbian democracy movement is a scandal!" - complaint by Dr Martin Schneider to the Broadcasting Council: "MDR reporters try to discredit the election, spread half-truths and ignore facts; coverage in the Sorbian programme Wuhladko was correspondingly one-sided...".

17 November 2018: Ceremonial constituent session of the Serbski Sejm in the Sorbian Cultural Centre in Schleife with a festive speech and election party.

8 February 2018: Cottbus Mayor Holger Kelch welcomes and receives Serbski Sejm in the town hall: "Strengthening contacts and exploring possibilities for cooperation".

13 February 2018: Sorbs' grassroots want unity between Domowina and Serbski Sejm (Radio Lausitz), also the "Welt" (15. 2. 2018).

8 March 2019: General Assembly of the European Free Alliance (EFA) unanimously decides to support the Serbski Sejm for self-determination.

Although there is a rudimentary will among many German politicians to approve a "minority policy" with special regulations in Lusatia, they repeatedly argue from the position of the majority. For example, the scientific service of the German Bundestag claims that Sorbs are not a people at all. Or in connection with the ratification of ILO 169 by the Bundestag in April 2021, the same service claims, contrary to any historical evidence, that Sorbs, who already resided in Lusatia at the time of the conquest, colonisation and establishment of the current state borders, are not an indigenous people.

17 April 2021: The Serbski Sejm adopts a points programme for the self-determination of the Sorbian people by means of a self-governing body.

10 June 2021: The Foundation for the Sorbian People rejects the application for funding for an office of the Serbski Sejm, "the request (self-determination; note) does not correspond to the will of the founders", discussion about what the will of the founders is, is rejected by the state and the Foundation.

12 June 2021: The Serbski Sejm adopts a resolution declaring the indigeneity of the Sorbian/Wendish people and the full enjoyment of the rights derived from ILO Convention 169, the Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, 1989, ratified by the Federal Republic of Germany in March 2022, also under pressure from the Serbski Sejm, and from Resolution 61/295, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007.

6 July 2021: Invitation to the heads of government and ministers of the interior of the three governments that determine the Sorbs (Federal Government, Brandenburg, Saxony) for talks, remains unanswered, contrary to constitutional principles.

26 August 2021: In talks between the Serbski Sejm and the delegation of the Council of Europe's Advisory Council on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), the latter confirms that the state has to hear all existing representations of a constituent people and not only those financed by it.

11 November 2021: The chairperson of the MDR Broadcasting Council excludes the Serbski Sejm from the right of nomination for the seat on the Broadcasting Council provided for in the new State Treaty for the Sorbian people.

19 November 2021: Prof. Oeter, professor of international law at the University of Hamburg, explains the self-governing body as the best means for the Sorbian people in a public online seminar; the urgent invitation to the panel discussion on Sorbian self-determination organised on the same day by the Serbski Sejm and the Sächsische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung has to be cancelled due to corona.