

## Language is the heart of national minorities: the message from the exhibition opening

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On the evening of November 29, 2012, the exhibition "Language is the heart of a nation - national minorities" was held in the exhibition hall of the Geographic Department of the Faculty of Science in Prague's Albertov. The exhibition, organized by Forum Minority Research Institute from Šamorín, Slovakia, in collaboration with the host institution (Historical Geography Research Centre) can be seen until January 18, 2013. The exhibition panels with their image and accompanying text introduce the development of the language of the Hungarian ethnic minority in southern Slovakia in the period from 1918 to 2011 through examples of public inscriptions. The exhibition was officially opened by Dr. Evžen Gál, Ph.D., from the Department of Central European Studies of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, and Dr. Pavel Chromý, Ph.D., from the Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Faculty of Science, Charles University in Prague. Following the introductory words of the speakers, who also reminisced about their personal encounter with the issue of visual bilingualism and the Hungarian minority in the Slovak Republic, guests were welcomed by the co-author and initiator of the exhibition, Mgr. Örs Orosz, who pointed out that the presented public signs: names of institutions, traffic signs, official documents suggest a lot about the legal background and development of the languages of national minorities in Czechoslovakia, but also about the fate of the Hungarian minority.

With the creation of Czechoslovakia after the First World War, half a million members of the Hungarian community in Southern Slovak suddenly found themselves on the territory of a foreign language state. What was the fate of the Hungarian minority language use in the public sphere in the following decades? With the changing political climate – sometimes more or less favourable and tolerant – the rules for the use of language in public affairs also changed. If we perceive the content of rules and regulations which define the rights of national minorities and language minorities, we can say that their level in today's independent Slovak Republic lags far behind the regulations of the first Czechoslovak Republic.

The question of the use of languages of national minorities in the Slovak Republic got into the centre of attention the last time in 2009. The first Fico government with the participation of the Slovak National Party, presented a comprehensive amendment to the State Language Law. The Language Act brought stricter measures and the possibility of sanctions for its violation. In many cases, it intervened in the use of minority languages. The adoption of the law provoked sharp reactions in Slovakia and abroad: on September 1, 2009 approximately 10 000 people protested against the law on the football field in Dunajská Streda and subsequently the Slovak-Hungarian diplomatic relations found themselves on the freezing point. The law has also been criticized by Knut Vollebaekem, Chief

Steward of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Venice Commission – Council of Europe's expert body – marked some of its provisions directly incompatible with certain international commitments of Slovakia. The law was eventually alleviated by the government of Iveta Radičová in 2010, but the state before 2009 was not returned. The options for some sanctions are still enshrined in the law.

Moreover, our extensive surveys of visual bilingualism conducted by Forum Institute in 2010 confirmed that some legal provisions are not implemented in practice because they are not feasible and the use of minority languages in the Slovak Republic is significantly declining. The Radičová government in 2011 proposed to the parliament for a general amendment to the law on the use of languages of national minorities, which was adopted by deputies in an abridged form. In connection with the negotiation of the law, a campaign was launched in the form of civil disobedience for bilingual signs which did not have any precedent in the Hungarian community. This resulted in different, independent, so-called "sticker" campaigns for the publication of notices in Hungarian. The anonymous association For bilingual Southern Slovakia pointed to the neglected field of the use of minority languages in the railway and road transport several times, all through the flash mob, performances and short films distributed on the Internet, which caught the attention of the general public.

With the creation of this show, the authors had in mind to point out similar points of interest, positive and negative examples of the centennial history of visual bilingualism in Southern Slovakia. Everyday impacts and changing rules on the use of Hungarian in public affairs influenced by the political climate were shown through the projected short films. While viewing the actual signs and inscriptions, the guests of the exhibition opening could feel the atmosphere of the clash of two cultures and two languages on the territory of Southern Slovakia. The debated issue led to a reflection on the current formulation (not only linguistic) of minority rights.