

**The Amendment to the Slovak State Language Act: A Necessary Measure to
Protect the Slovak Language or a Tool of Minority Control?**

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, Helena Mede, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics and Society declare herewith that the present thesis titled “The Amendment to the Slovak State Language Act: A Necessary Measure to Protect the Slovak Language or a Tool of Minority Control?” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 29 May 2025

Helena Mede

Abstract

This thesis examines the 2024 amendment to the State Language Act in Slovakia, analyzing its socio-political implications regarding language policy and nationalism. While the Ministry of Culture, which proposed the amendment, insists that it is a neutral measure aimed at strengthening the status of the Slovak language, legal experts and minority rights advocates have raised concerns about its disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, particularly the Hungarian-speaking population. Placing the amendment within the broader historical context of Slovak language policy, the thesis explores how nationalism and historical mythmaking have shaped the state's approach to linguistic regulation. Drawing on discourse and policy analysis, it investigates whether the amendment functions not only as a tool of language management but also as a mechanism of symbolic nation-building. Ultimately, the study argues that the 2024 amendment reflects a form of ethnolinguistic nationalism, revealing how contemporary legislation continues to be informed by historical narratives and upholds measures which become harmful for minority languages in the long term.

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List of Abbreviations

SNS - Slovak National Party (Slovenská Národná Strana)

SMER - Direction Social Democracy (SMER – sociálna demokracia)

HZDS - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Hnutie za Demokratické Slovensko)

ECRML - European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

FCNM - Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

SLL - Law on the State Language of the Slovak Republic (Zákon o štátnom jazyku Slovenskej republiky)

OLaNO - Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní Ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti)

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2024, the Slovak Ministry of Culture proposed an amendment to the State Language Act, aiming to reinforce the role of the Slovak language in public and official communication. While the Ministry insists the law is not directed against national minorities and respects international treaties (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic 2024), concerns were raised among minority political party leaders, minority media outlets, and experts, with the language law making its way back into the political and public discourse. The amendment proposed by the Slovak National Party penalizes small or complete lack of Slovak equivalent text on public signage, for self-employed individuals and legal entities, through an increase in fines and stricter enforcement mechanisms. Questions are raised whether such attempts will affect minority languages' autonomy. As a lawyer and expert on minority rights, János Fiala Butora shares, the amendment should not be ignored, further addressing the shortcomings of the existing law itself, suggesting how the strengthening of the Slovak language would have serious consequences, weakening the others (Kern 2024). These developments are not isolated. They reflect a broader political shift in Slovakia, where nationalist and culturally conservative rhetoric is promoted through governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Culture. Statements from leading political figures, such as the claim that "Slovak culture is Slovak and no other" (Šimkovičová 2023, authors translation), signal cultural exclusivism. In this climate, language becomes a symbolic ground in the construction of national identity. Unaddressed grievances, nationalist sentiments, and political agendas tend to heighten tensions, which can lead to the sensationalizing of discussions in the public sphere, further highlighting the need for targeted and relevant academic research.

This thesis argues that the Slovak State Language Act, including its 2024 proposed amendment, functions not as a tool for cultural preservation but as an instrument of symbolic exclusion with tangible socio-political impacts on minority communities. Aiming to answer this question, I explore the effects of nationalism in Slovak language policy and its impacts on majority-minority relations in the context of Slovakia. More specifically I would like to assess whether seemingly “harmless” preservation and strengthening efforts of the Slovak language and identity historically can negatively impact minority language use even today. I further question why such amendments are being created by the current government and how that relates to Slovakia's contentious past, assessing developments as well as shortcomings.

The use of language policy to promote linguistic hierarchies is not new in Slovakia. During the Mečiar government in the 1990s and following in 2009 under Robert Fico, similar amendments to the language law hierarchized Slovak over minority languages, through the implementation of fines, leading to international controversy. These governments have actively contributed to the entrenchment of minority languages, particularly through the promotion of nationalist rhetoric and the implementation of exclusionary language policies. The Slovak National Party (SNS), for instance, has historically not only popularized anti-Hungarian discourse but also supported controversial legislation aimed at prioritizing the Slovak language, enshrined in the Constitution. As János Fiala-Butora notes, “Practically the whole Slovak political spectrum is responsible for creating a secondary position for minorities, given the Constitution and the Law on the State Language, and enforcing it through an ineffective Law on the Use of Minority Languages.” (Fiala-Butora 2025). The Hungarian language has thus been relegated to a secondary position, allowing such a legal framework to be established and continue to exist.

These patterns continue in the recent initiatives, and the very premise of such measures raises critical questions: Is the Slovak language genuinely in need of protection? And does linguistic diversity pose a threat to national cohesion? This thesis engages with these questions through a multidisciplinary lens, drawing on insights from history, linguistics and nationalism studies. By combining legal, policy, and media discourse analysis, it examines how nationalist language policies function as tools of symbolic exclusion and investigates the broader implications of such measures for minority rights and interethnic relations in Slovakia. In doing so, this research seeks to address an underexplored gap in the literature on language politics, nationalism, and minority discrimination in Slovakia. More specifically, the socio-cultural impacts of nationalist and discriminatory language laws and policies and their long term consequences.

The first section will delve into the historical background and character of nationalism in Slovakia through the different periods leading to it's independence and creation of the constitution. Slovak nationalism is thus explored as a reaction to grievances and dynamics of subordination through the periods under Hungarian and then later Czech governance, suggesting how Slovak national identity was established negatively and through opposition. Language is thus highlighted as a tool of symbolic identity creation through it's role in early nation-building practices and later establishment of a monolingual nation-state. In the literature review key works by authors such as Bakker (1997), Daftary and Gál (2003) and more recently Fiala-Butora (2022) are explored focusing on minority-majority relations and language policy developments within the context of nationalism.

In the conceptual framework and methodology, the thesis will draw on canonical works such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) to explain the role language plays in the construction of national identity whilst defining key concepts from the field. It will further

examine how nationalism is promoted through language policy and how specific framings contribute to the reinforcement of linguistic hierarchies. To ground these dynamics in the Slovak context, the thesis will also incorporate the work of János Fiala-Butora. In the body of the thesis, three chapters are explored namely the 1995 Act on the State Language of the Slovak Republic, the 2009 amendment to the State Language Act and the 2024 Amendment to the State Language Act through a political and historical background, policy analysis. Through these fields the language law and amendments are contextualized, analysed and target their realistic socio-cultural impacts on communities. It examines how specific legislative framings have promoted, and continue to promote, nationalist ideologies and hierarchical language regimes in Slovakia. The thesis will additionally incorporate media discourse analysis within the policy analysis analyzing the political context in which these policies have emerged highlighting how narratives surrounding language, identity, and national belonging are constructed, circulated, and contested in the public sphere. Framing this will be statements from lawyers, minority rights experts, activists and governmental figures implementing real world examples to the policy analysis.

Finally, the thesis will conclude with results, presenting the findings and a discussion on the current Language Law and its limitations. Based on the evidence presented, it argues that Slovakia has actively promoted nationalism and reinforced linguistic hierarchies through its language policies. Suggesting how efforts to strengthen the Slovak language should avoid punitive measures and exclusionary practices. The thesis will close with recommendations aimed at fostering both a strong national identity and the protection of minority language rights in a more inclusive and democratic manner.

Chapter 2: Historical context and background

The independence of Slovakia and the establishment of its constitution, which were followed by a series of controversial language laws prioritizing Slovak as the primary and exclusive language of the nation, may be seen as reflecting histories of national expression, cultural memory, mythmaking, and experiences of subordination. To understand the ideologies and socio-political environment that may have shaped these language laws, a brief historical overview is essential. Slovak nationalism is best characterized by a passive emergence through language codification, education, and literature by intellectual elites such as Ľudovít Štúr, rather than mass political mobilization, indicating that national identity was primarily constructed through language and culture (Poláčková 2009, 363).

In Slovakia, different cultures met and coexisted alongside one another, sometimes at peace, other times in tension. The ethnic composition of the territory was the result of natural geography, migration, but also of forced political mechanisms such as border remapping or population exchanges. Having belonged to various empires and regimes, Slovakia only gained independence in 1993, providing a context in which historical grievances could reemerge. This period is often marked as a search for “identity and stability” (Mikula 2021, 371). The post-communist transition, culminating in the dissolution of the USSR, marked the fall of oppressive regimes and a striving for democratization. Yet Bakker (1997) and Kusý (2024) note how this time was also marked by contradictions, as nation-building practices often disregarded “multiethnic realities” (Kusý 2024, 305), and minority languages received a subordinate status (Kusý 2024, 305; Bakker 1997, 9). Slovakia’s nation-building process during this time reflected features of an

ethnically divided society, with political discourse influenced and dominated by the Slovak majority, disregarding minorities (Regelmann 2009, 175).

The assertion of Slovak identity can be understood as having been constructed in opposition to others, such as the Republic of Hungary, marked as an external other, and the Hungarian minority as an internal other (Strážay 2005, 51). This suggests how historical grievances have impacted current socio-political attitudes (Just and Morgado 2023, 51). While these patterns do not determine present-day attitudes and have become more complex, they help contextualize how narratives of historical grievance may continue to impact political discourse and minority-majority dynamics in Slovakia (Just and Morgado 2023, 51).

Slovakia's nation-building efforts are notably highlighted in the Constitution, reflecting historical continuity and legitimization of heritage. As Juviler and Stroschein stress, "The identity of a political community is put into record in its fundamental artefacts such as a state constitution" (cited in Regelmann 2009, 183), further suggesting that it is "a symbolic expression of national identity, values, and political boundaries" and used for "nation-building and boundary-setting" purposes, especially in post-transition states like Slovakia. These efforts often serve to exclude minorities (Regelmann 2009, 183). It states the following: "We, the Slovak nation, bearing in mind the political and cultural heritage of our ancestors and the centuries of experience from struggles for national existence and our own statehood, in the spirit of the Cyrilo-Methodian spiritual heritage and the historical legacy of Great Moravia" (Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic 1992). This suggests how Slovakia's early history becomes a key foundation for its modern national identity. The association of the Slovak people with the Great Moravian Empire, Bakker (1997) notes, becomes "one of the most important periods of historical awareness for the Czechs and Slovaks" (Bakker 1997, 37) and shows how the past is symbolically constructed in the present.

As the Constitution declares, the Slovak nation is legitimized through its past . Furthermore, the Constitution states, “recognizing the natural right of nations to self-determination, together with members of national minorities and ethnic groups living on the territory of the Slovak Republic” (Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic 1992). Whilst it reflects the existence of minorities and ethnic groups on its territory, they are not considered part of the establishment of the nation. As referred to in the Constitution, the history of the modern-day Slovak nation reaches back to the Great Moravian Empire. This period became fundamental politically and linguistically in the mid-to-late 19th-century Slovak national movement, which gathered momentum as a reaction to Hungarianization policies (Nábělková 2016, 144; Orton 1976, 338). The leaders of these movements were literary figures, and some are said to have even promoted a Hungaro-Slavicism, with a loyalty to the state but still presenting a distinct Slavic identity (Varga-Kuna 2011, 162). A turning point was writer Ľudovít Štúr, widely recognized for codifying the Slovak language based on the central Slovak dialect, which became the root of modern-day written Slovak and is associated with a shift in the discourse regarding Slovak identity (Varga-Kuna 2011, 162).

Maxwell argues that Štúr lacked political imperatives and was keen on Hungarian identity, while Varga opposes this, claiming that he was demanding autonomy and language rights, with territorial and autonomy goals reaching back to as early as 1861 (Varga-Kuna 2011, 163). According to Connor, Slovak identity carried a “negative nature” in the Habsburg Empire (as quoted in Barker 1998, 63). He states, "The Slovaks were aware that they were neither German nor Magyar, long before they possessed positive opinions concerning their ethnic or national identity" (as quoted in Barker 1998, 65).

The periods of the world wars that followed marked a series of border remappings, with the Hungarians, along with the Germans, deemed collectively guilty for the break-up of the prewar

state (Bakker 1997, 39). Following the establishment of Czechoslovakia, Bakker emphasizes how such events brought an end to “thousands of years of Hungarian rule over the borders” (Bakker 1997, 38). Hungarians were expelled, fled, or migrated, with a large part taking part in population exchange—some voluntarily and some by force.

The brief early history of Slovakia illustrates how language and culture became central to defining the nation, often positioned in direct opposition to the Hungarian tribes and later kingdoms that ruled over Slovak territories. These narratives highlight a legacy of subordination and a continued struggle for recognition, an idea also reflected in the Slovak Constitution. Key historical moments, such as the period of Hungarianization, the Treaty of Trianon, and the reannexation of territories, marked shifting dynamics and subordinating policies between Slovaks and Hungarians. Slovak nationalism in this early period emerged in a largely passive and elitist manner, shaped more by cultural expression, such as linguistic codification, than by mass political mobilization.

A period of second subordination and nationalism can be marked under the Czechoslovak nation, ultimately leading up to independence in 1993. An increase in national consciousness can be observed (Barker 1998, 59). The construction of Slovak identity was thus not only in opposition to the Hungarian but also the Czech identity (Barker 1998, 64). Throughout the years, the Slovaks lacked national recognition and started to feel excluded from major decisions. Barker further claims that nationalism lacked a positive, self-defining content. This negative identity was then exacerbated by the Mečiar government and independence (Moormann-Kimáková 2016, 192). Slovak nationalism was used to justify the split and grew stronger in this period, marked by a “problematic historical legacy of conflict” (Regelmann 2009, 181–182). Strážay notes how negative historical experiences from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the World Wars, and the

configuration of political elites in both Slovakia and Hungary contributed to an image of Hungary wanting to disintegrate the “young Slovak Republic” (Strážay 2005, 52). A so-called Hungarian threat was further reinforced through Vladimír Mečiar. Nationalism came to be a top-down approach presented by elites “without reference to the people” (Barker 1998, 66).

Slovak national identity was historically constructed through cultural means such as language codification and in opposition to others. These narratives can later be reflected in the Slovak Constitution and accompanying language laws. Rather than approaching this as an inevitable progression, it is more accurate to see how political actors selected historical themes to justify their policies, which hierarchize the Slovak language while subordinating its minority languages. This showcases how nationalist ideologies rooted in grievances, myths, and exclusionary rhetoric have influenced legal frameworks—not as deterministic forces, but as discursive tools. This becomes important in understanding the harmful consequences of hierarchical language policies and how they become vehicles of exclusion.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

A literature review of works from nationalism studies, ethnic politics, linguistics, and history reveals the complex nature of Slovak-Hungarian relations and the marginalization that has occurred through language policies shaped in part by nationalism. These works suggest that nation-building practices, informed by historical feelings of subordination and a search for identity under Hungarian rule and later Czechoslovakia, contributed to Slovakia's path to independence and influenced the establishment of legal frameworks further on. This includes the 1992 Constitution and a series of language laws, all of which have been interpreted as contributing to the construction of a national identity defined in part through exclusion and opposition.

Historical and nationalist foundations are explored through Bakker's work, which synthesizes Slovak-Hungarian minority-majority dynamics and highlights historical processes such as Hungarianization and re-Slovakization. He emphasizes the systematic tools of discrimination used against the Hungarian minority and the complexities of navigating these histories. Kelley's chapter "The Mečiar Hurdle and Beyond" adds to this by showing how Slovakia's experience under Hungarian and Czech rule contributed to the drive for independence, rooted in historical grievances (Kelley 2004). Similarly, Daftary and Gál (2003) argue that Slovak national identity developed largely in opposition to Czech and Hungarian influence, noting that Slovaks during the Czechoslovak Republic often felt that Hungarian rule had merely been replaced by Czech domination, fueling increased nationalism. Seton-Watson further underscores how Slovak nationalism emerged from cultural-linguistic traditions rather than political mobilization, with language-building practices playing a central role in national identity construction. Together, the works of Bakker (1997) and Daftary and Gál (2003) provide a crucial foundation for

understanding the historical grievances and majority-minority dynamics that shaped post-independence policies, specifically those reinstating the Slovak language as primary.

Continuing this trajectory, Regelmann's chapter "Political Community, Political Institutions and Minority Politics in Slovakia 1998–2006" further supports the view of Slovakia as an ethnically divided society that has actively disregarded its minorities. She emphasizes that nationalist principles were not limited to radical or far-right parties but were also present in more moderate political forces (Regelmann 2009, 181). A key theme in her analysis is the spread of Slovak self-determination myths, particularly those of subordination and sovereignty, which this thesis also addresses. Language laws, according to Regelmann (2009), were interpreted by observers not only as a response to historical Czech domination but also as targeted against internal minorities such as the Hungarian population (Regelmann 2009, 181). Citing Daftary and Gál, she illustrates how nationalist policies emerged from entrenched narratives that positioned both external and internal actors—Czechs and Hungarians—as threats to Slovak identity (Regelmann 2009, 181). Her work situates these policies within broader mythologies of grievance and ethnic opposition that continue to shape political attitudes and legislative practices in the Slovak Republic.

Building on these narratives of subordination, Bakker (1997) offers a crucial analysis of how nationalist myths were embedded in legal frameworks, particularly through the 1992 Constitution and the Language Laws of 1990, 1993, and 1995. He highlights a shift toward hostility following the 1992 elections (Bakker 1997, 132), situating these developments within broader patterns of minority marginalization. Bakker also draws attention to nationalist slogans such as "Na Slovensku po slovensky" ("In Slovakia, [speak] Slovak") (Bakker 1997, 49), which reflect how policy and political rhetoric shaped attitudes toward the Hungarian minority. His work

demonstrates how language laws not only reinforced the secondary status of minorities but also functioned as symbolic tools of exclusion. These legal mechanisms, drawing on historical grievances and nationalist narratives, were at times instrumentalized by political elites to frame the Hungarian minority as the internal other, potentially contributing to heightened interethnic tensions in post-independence Slovakia.

Political opportunism significantly shaped Slovakia's approach to language policy. Kelley (2004) illustrates how Mečiar's government used nationalist rhetoric during EU accession, while international actors failed to curb exclusionary practices. Jenne (2007) adds that external influences, particularly from Hungary, contributed to rising tensions. She shows how both Slovak elites and Hungarian minority leaders leveraged identity politics—shifting from territorial claims to rights-focused “ethnic bargaining” (Jenne 2007, 104). These dynamics reveal how domestic nationalism and international pressures intersected in shaping minority relations.

Synthesizing these works and bringing them into a closer context is the work of János Fiala-Butora (2022). He explores the Slovak State Language Act and how the legal framework becomes contradictory and enforces the Slovak language, hierarchizing it. “Slovakia thus prohibits discrimination on the basis of language, while at the same time it entrenches and promotes a system of significant linguistic inequality. Speakers of all languages are equal – if they speak Slovak” (Fiala-Butora 2022). Deegan-Krause accurately highlights how Slovakness is privileged in society and institutions (as cited in Regelman 2009, 181). While there is substantial scholarship on Slovak nationalism and language policy, particularly around the 1995 and 2009 amendments, gaps remain in situating historical developments within current legislative proposals such as the 2024 amendment. Literature focuses on immediate legal frameworks or international reactions, while lacking long-term analysis of how historical narratives of subordination and nationalism continue

to shape present-day majority–minority relations. There is also limited research on the role of political discourse, media framing, and elite-driven narratives in upholding these exclusionary practices. Existing studies often present polarized perspectives, lacking a nuanced view of how both majority and minority actors contribute to the tensions. This thesis seeks to fill these gaps by situating recent developments within a broader historical context, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how language laws function as tools of symbolic and structural exclusion in Slovakia.

Chapter 4: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This chapter outlines the conceptual and methodological approach of the research, focusing on how nationalism has informed and influenced the development and framing of language laws in Slovakia. Key concepts that inform the research appear through the intersections of language, law, and nationalism within the context of Slovakia, particularly in the works of Anderson (1991) and Blommaert (2006). Further applications are explored through Fiala-Butora (2022) and Jenne (2007). Building on the historical background of nationalism in Slovakia, marked by periods of subordination and culminating in the independence of the state, the conceptual framework establishes how nationalist narratives shape the linguistic legal framework of Slovakia and create socio-political impacts. The second part of the chapter outlines the tools used to assess these developments, including a policy analysis of the 1995, 2009, and 2024 amendments and language laws, situating them within a broader framework through a combined media discourse analysis. The research examines how language policy operates as a tool of national identity formation, nation-building, and exclusion.

Definition of concepts

Central to this question is a clear outline of the core concepts. A nation, as Anderson defines, is an “imagined political community — imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1983, 6), meaning nations are artificial constructions that connect people through imagined commonalities. In the Slovak case, the imagined community is one created by and for Slovaks, excluding linguistic diversity and defining itself in opposition to internal and external threats. “In the process (of print capitalism), they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field... that only those... so

belonged” (Anderson 1983, 44). Anderson suggests that language connects, but also excludes. A state is a legal entity; a nation-state, then, is a group sharing culture, language, or history, legitimized through the state and rooted in nationalism (Blommaert 2006, 239). Slovakia functions as a nation-state based on the cultural ideal of its dominant group.

Language here is more than a communicative tool or identity marker — it upholds hierarchies and standardizes linguistic norms through political power. The national language becomes a tool of identity-building that reflects the culture and history of the Slovak nation (Blommaert 2006, 239). Language policy institutionalizes the imagined community and emerges from multiple actors, highlighting its interdisciplinary complexity (Blommaert 2006, 240). Thus, language is not neutral but politically charged. It includes and excludes, and is a medium of state power. National language policies reflect ideological constructions of a “standard language,” privileging some varieties while marginalizing others (Blommaert 2006, 240). This makes language policy a key mechanism for institutionalizing imagined communities. When a language is promoted as dominant through official policy, it forms a *sociolinguistic regime* — systems of language hierarchies upheld by dominant ideologies (Blommaert 2006, 243). This is visible in Slovakia, where certain languages are privileged and others marginalized. Language has both communicative and symbolic functions (Moormann-Kimáková 2016, 42). For this research, the symbolic function is central, as it often fuels conflict. Language holds “identity value” — the idea that a group cannot exist without it (Moormann-Kimáková 2016, 33). Both Slovak and Hungarian carry such value. For Slovaks, this is tied to past subordination and is legally recognized; for Hungarians, it is restricted and policed by institutions.

As discussed in the Background chapter, Moormann-Kimáková explains that policy tools used against the Hungarian minority were often framed as acts of “historical justice” or “nation-

building” (2016, 191), rooted in legacies such as Hungarianization and post–World War II border changes.

Theoretical Approaches

A deeper analysis of the theories framing this thesis establishes its main conceptual approaches. Blommaert’s work is central (Blommaert 2006). He notes the “sociolinguistic truism that societies are almost by necessity multilingual,” despite monolingual self-perceptions (243), and argues that “official administrative belonging” is a weak proxy for “sociolinguistic belonging” (238).

Despite multilingual realities, Slovak language law proclaims Slovak as the national language, upholding a “sociolinguistic regime” that enforces linguistic hierarchies (243). Language policies are based on ideologies that often “prohibit linguistic diversity” (244). Silverstein’s (1996) “monoglot ideology,” as discussed by Blommaert, is an implicit, gradual force embedded in everyday life (241). Drawing on Foucault’s “governmentality” and Bourdieu’s “habitus,” Blommaert argues that power operates through norms and institutions (244). Though not always overtly coercive, language policies can create internalized subordination and limit linguistic expression, shaping identity. In Slovakia, Hungarian speakers are legally equal, yet Slovak is institutionally privileged, relegating minorities to a secondary status in their own country.

Blommaert views language policy as a “niched activity” that cannot be fully implemented top-down. However, Horony Ákos argues that such policies can erode language and identity, stating that “language change is almost inevitably followed by a change in national identity” (Paraméter 2024). While not always intentional, language policies can still produce harmful outcomes.

The dominance of Slovak is emphasized in its role as the state language (Regelmann 2009, 184), seen by nationalist politicians as a core element of citizenship. Csergő highlights it as the nation's most important asset (as cited in Regelmann 2009, 184). Minorities have been framed not only as subordinate but as threats to national cohesion, a view rooted in historical narratives still present today (Malloy in Surova 2020).

Jenne's work supports the idea that historical grievances alone don't fully explain ethnic conflict. Her theories highlight the interplay between states, minorities, and external actors, showing how minority political parties may radicalize or moderate over time (Jenne 2007, 38). She argues that national consciousness can lead minorities to seek self-determination (Jenne 2006, 41), but this thesis suggests that many seek coexistence and recognition, not statehood. Radicalization often stems from elites rather than grassroots movements (Jenne 2006), as supported by Horony Ákos and Tamás Pataki, who emphasize symbolic recognition over secession. Ethnic conflict often arises when minorities challenge the status quo, with state responses influenced by actors like Hungary as a kin-state (Jenne 2006, 41–42). Figure 2.3: Decision Tree of Ethnic Bargaining illustrates how focus tends to be placed on minority reactions. Yet this thesis highlights how language-based nationalism can spark conflict without minority mobilization, showing how top-down language laws contribute to ethnic tension.

Fiala-Butora provides another crucial perspective, especially his concept of the zero-sum game. He argues that the Slovak constitution privileges Slovak as the sole state language, disadvantaging minorities in ways that may violate anti-discrimination law and international equality norms (Fiala-Butora 2022, 285–298). He describes how legal protections on paper are undermined by enforcement practices that create a linguistic hierarchy. Measures such as restricting bilingual signage offer no added benefit to Slovak speakers yet suppress minority

language use. As Fiala-Butora puts it: “Slovakia prohibits discrimination on the basis of language, while at the same time it entrenches... linguistic inequality. Speakers of all languages are equal – if they speak Slovak” (298). This challenges the zero-sum logic, suggesting that elevating minority languages does not threaten the state language.

Methodology

The methodology presents a qualitative and interpretive analysis, including legal text analysis, policy review, and media discourse analysis. Sources include the Constitution of Slovakia from 1992, the Language Laws of 1995 and 2009, and the proposed Language Law amendment. Additional sources comprise statements from the Ministry of Culture and interviews with legal experts and non-partisan governmental figures. This thesis employs media discourse analysis within the framework of policy analysis, incorporating expert perspectives from lawyers, government officials, and minority rights advocates. The goal is to highlight the real-world consequences of language laws in an interdisciplinary manner, going beyond technical legal interpretations to examine their broader social and political impacts.

The documents used include policy texts such as language laws and constitutional articles, expert interviews, academic articles, and reports. These are framed by statements from János Fiala-Butora, human rights lawyer and minority rights expert; Horony Ákos and László Bukovszky, the current and former Government Plenipotentiaries for National Minorities of the Slovak Republic; and Tamás Pataki, Slovak-Hungarian activist and founder of the civic initiative “Kompromissz,” which advocates for minority rights. A key limitation of this study is the availability and legal status of some documents, such as the proposed amendment to the Language Law, which has not

been officially published or enacted due to unforeseen political circumstances. The government has also not publicly addressed its current status.

Chapter 5: Law on the State Language of the Slovak Republic (SLL)

This section analyzes three key periods of nationalist language policy implementation in Slovakia: the 1995 State Language Act, the 2009 Amendment, and the 2024 Proposal. These three periods correspond to Slovak independence, Europeanization, and, lastly, the re-emergence of nationalist discourse. Drawing on historical background and the earlier theoretical framework, this section examines how these policies reinforce nationalist narratives, uphold a socio-linguistic regime, and impact minority languages and their speakers. The analysis is supported by expert insights and media sources.

The dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1990 marked the emergence of “the first signs of tension” between Hungarians and Slovaks (Daftary and Gál 2003, 42). In this climate, the Slovak National Party (SNS) campaigned for a language law that “aimed at depriving [the] Hungarian minority of the right to use its mother tongue in official matters as a sort of ‘historical justice’” (Daftary and Gál 2003, 42). Rising inter-ethnic tensions and confusion contributed to the re-election of Vladimír Mečiar and his HZDS party. Language was increasingly used to “awaken patriotic feelings” (Daftary and Gál 2003, 45), and Mečiar asserted his political stance against Prague (Daftary and Gál 2003, 43). An important precursor to the 1995 Act was the 1992 Constitution, which upheld a “one state, one language” policy. Minority rights were protected however “sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Slovak Republic” (Daftary and Gál 2003, 46). This period reflects how nationalist fears and attitudes were already embedded in legal frameworks. Election campaigns featured “anti-Slovak finger pointing at the Hungarian parties” (Daftary and Gál 2003, 46).

The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), led by Mečiar, won elections and joined with the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) at a time when EU accession was being debated. Although Slovakia was reprimanded for failing to resolve its minority disputes, Mečiar continued to implement minority-targeting policies through educational programs (Jenne 2007, 103). While international audiences were presented with an image of support for minority rights, “nation-building” and “state-building” efforts intensified (Daftary and Gál 2003, 46). An “aggressive anti-minority campaign” emerged a year before the language law was implemented, and opposition to the law was portrayed as anti-Slovak (Daftary and Gál 2003, 46). The law required the use of Slovak “in almost every area of public life” (Jenne 2007, 104), contributing to a hostile sociopolitical environment, including public rallies calling for the expulsion of Hungarians to Hungary.

The law states that “the State language on the territory of the Slovak Republic is Slovak” and that it “has precedence over other languages” (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 593/2009 Z.z. - Zásady Vlády Slovenskej Republiky k Zákonu Národnej Rady Slovenskej Republiky č. 270/1995 Z. z. o Štátnom Jazyku Slovenskej Republiky v Znení Neskorších Predpisov, author’s translation). It is described as repressive (Szabolcs and Kontra 2000, 76), targeting education, public signage, and mandating the exclusive use of Slovak in public administration, media, courts, healthcare, and education. Violations were punishable by fines of up to 500,000 Sk (National Council of the Slovak Republic 1995). The law restricted minority language use in both public and private spheres, as Harlig (1997) suggests (as cited in Regelmann 2009, 188), and was partly justified as protecting Slovak from “Americanisms” (Daftary and Gál 2003, 46).

The State Language Act promoted a "one language, one state" model (Regelmann 2009, 189), reflecting the monoglot ideology. It was applied not only against Czech but especially against Hungarian (Daftary and Gál 2003, 47). The Hungarianization period is said to be referenced as justification (Daftary and Gál 2003, 47), the 1996 Minority Protection Association further noted that "Its barely hidden purpose is to remedy the 'historical grievances' that fell upon the Slovak language, to eliminate the linguistic identity of minorities and to use the linguistic superiority of the state-forming nation as a tool of assimilation" (Daftary and Gál 2003, 48). This suggests echoes of historical subordination and the construction of identity in opposition to the Hungarian and Czech populations.

The 1995 Language Act had significant implications. Daftary and Gál suggest that, although framed as a neutral measure, it was aimed at the Hungarians, reflecting attempts to reinforce a monolingual nation-state while disregarding its multicultural reality (Regelmann 2009, 188). Furthermore, it triggered internal actors, such as Hungarian minority political parties, to mobilize and moderate, shifting their demands from minority issues to broader concerns such as the rule of law and democracy (Jenne 2007, 105). External actors, such as the kin-state Hungary, responded by blocking Slovakia's admission to the Council of Europe, escalating tensions and fueling autonomy demands (Jenne 2007, 189). These developments illustrate the complex dynamics between minority and majority actors in periods of conflict. What followed was the Minority Language Law passed in 1999, which annulled sanctions and attempted to fill legal gaps, but remained vague and poorly implemented (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 156; Daftary & Gál in Regelmann 2009, 188). Regelmann (2009, 193) notes the continued absence of a coherent minority rights framework. Kalman Petöcz observed that Hungarians in Slovakia were treated as "second-

class citizens in their own state” (as cited in Jenne 2004, 105), summarizing the atmosphere of this period.

Chapter 6: The 2009 Amendment

This period followed Slovakia's accession to the European Union in 2004 under the Dzurinda government, with the vagueness of the 1999 Minority Law addressed on paper by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) (Daftary and Gál 2003, 66). The Act on the Use of Languages of National Minorities and the Charter entered into force in 2002 (Council of Europe). The 2009 period experienced a tightening of the 1995 Language Law, with the introduction of sanctions. It was an amendment to the governmental proposal, adopted by the parliament, enforcing the use of Slovak in various fields (Moormann-Kimáková 2016, 193), and introducing fines and penalization. The amendment was adopted by parliament and backed by a coalition including Smer, SNS, and the Hungarian minority party (Moormann-Kimáková 2016, 193).

The 2009 amendment was criticized as a “step back in the protection of minorities in Slovakia” and a “breach of international conventions binding upon the country” (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 154). Its implementation was justified by concerns over the “deterioration of linguistic culture, violations of grammatical rules, and excess of foreign expressions,” especially “anglicisms and Americanisms” (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 158). Although not explicitly aimed at minorities, the amendment effectively targeted them by expanding the required use of Slovak and introducing sanctions (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 158). The amendment broadened the scope of the law to include “legal persons, natural person-entrepreneurs and private individuals” (Article 1(5), as cited in Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 159), enforcing the use of Slovak in official communication. While it maintained the 20% threshold for minority language use in municipalities, it applied a “narrower scope of application” than the 1995 Act (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 159). Importantly, it reintroduced sanctions ranging from €100 to €5,000 for violations by

“public bodies, legal persons and natural person-entrepreneurs” (Article 9a(1), as cited in Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 162).

The 2009 amendment culminated in a conflict between Slovakia and Hungary (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 153), prompting intervention by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 157). Although the law was not strictly enforced due to international criticism, Moormann-Kimáková (2016, 196) notes that its symbolic presence remains significant and continues to be widely discussed in academic discourse. The law’s purpose, according to Fiala and Wardyn, was not to “improve the position of Slovak speakers” but rather to restrict “the use of minority languages by members of the minorities among themselves” (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 173). They also emphasize that the Slovak language was not endangered at the time (Fiala and Wardyn 2009, 173).

The 2009 amendment to the State Language Act marks the implementation of sanctions, disproportionately affecting minorities. This chapter has considered how external actors also inform language policy making. This period further highlights how language laws in Slovakia serve not only administrative purposes but also function as tools of national identity politics.

Chapter 7: The 2024 Proposal Amendment to the State Language Act

While Slovakia's European integration brought notable developments, significant systemic changes remain absent, and legislation continues to be vague. Although political tensions have largely de-escalated, language policy persists as a topic discussed primarily by experts. A key shift during this period is the removal of fines from language legislation. Additionally, the lack of minority political representation in 2020 marks this period, with no minority parties in government (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, *Vol'by do Národnej Rady Slovenskej Republiky - Platné Hlasy Odovzdané pre Politické Subjekty*). This trend continued in 2023, when Hungarian minority parties again failed to reach the electoral threshold (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, *Hlasy pre Politické Subjekty - NRSR 2023*). In 2024, the issue of language policy re-emerged with a proposed amendment to the State Language Act introduced by the Ministry of Culture, led by Martina Šimkovičová of the SNS party. Under her leadership, public institutions such as galleries and museums have been politicized, minority funding reduced, and nationalist ideologies increasingly promoted. These developments culminate in the proposed amendment. Although the full text is not publicly available—a limitation for this research—the proposal has been widely discussed in the media and political discourse and confirmed through expert interviews as both real and harmful.

The website of the Ministry of Culture (2024) states that the proposed amendment to the State Language Act aims to strengthen the position of the Slovak language in official and public communication. Penalties for non-compliance are to be increased, and enforcement mechanisms simplified. The Ministry emphasizes that the amendment is not directed against minorities, explicitly noting that it “rejects misinterpretations spreading on social media that fines could be

imposed on private individuals publishing personal texts with grammatical or spelling errors” (Ministry of Culture 2024, author’s translation). These efforts reflect recurring themes in the development of language policy in Slovakia, especially the need to address the excessive use of foreign expressions in official communication. The Ministry states that it considers it “unacceptable” for Slovak-language signage to appear less prominently than texts in other languages (Ministry of Culture 2024, author’s translation).

Political leaders, including Prime Minister Robert Fico, Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová, and Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, have all confirmed that there is no intention to target minorities, as claimed by György Gyimesi, a former member of the Slovak National Party and a Slovak-Hungarian politician from OĽaNO (ta3 2024, 08:35). Similarly, SNS parliamentarian Karol Farkašovský downplayed the controversy, suggesting that Slovaks tend to exaggerate and that the issue can be “calmly explained” to minorities by asserting the dominance of the state language (ta3 2024, 14:30–14:50). Such statements reflect a broader framing that delegitimizes minority concerns and treats their rights as politically sensitive or destabilizing, contributing to symbolic exclusion and discouraging open discussion. On the other hand, legal expert János Fiala-Butora has sharply criticized the amendment, arguing that it violates both the Slovak Constitution and international human rights standards, particularly by mandating the use of Slovak in private dealings, already creating international criticism (ta3 2024, 1:00; 15:30–17:08).

The recent proposal to “strengthen” the Slovak language through amendments to the State Language Act has caused debate about the effectiveness and consequences of such legislative tools. Critics question whether measures like fines genuinely contribute to language development and raise concerns about their impact on minority languages. Surova (2020) argues that the

amendment's consequences could be "drastic," noting that even the current legislation remains discriminatory. Horony Ákos, Government Commissioner for National Minorities, highlights a lack of communication between the government and the public regarding the proposed amendment, which contributes to public uncertainty (Paraméter 2024, 1:00:36). As of May 2025, he confirmed that the amendment process has been paused due to internal coalition issues, though the government initially planned to present the revised draft by the end of January (Eventus Podcast Studio 2025, 1:10). Legal expert János Fiala-Butora critiques the proposal, stating that any effort to reinforce Slovak inevitably comes at the expense of other languages, particularly those of national minorities like Hungarian, Rusyn, and Romani. He warns that provisions in the draft law, such as banning minority languages in transportation and post offices, effectively prohibit their public use (ta3 2024, 01:57–02:42). Fiala-Butora further argues that while promoting the state language is a legitimate goal, it should be pursued through education, not through restrictive legal measures. He emphasizes that even the existing law infringes on minority rights and continues to draw criticism from international bodies like the EU (ta3 2024, 06:39–07:39). He adds that enforcing bans on "Americanisms" through fines is unrealistic and warns against the unintended consequences of poorly drafted legislation. Reflecting on past experience, he describes how the Ministry of Culture has "bullied" bilingual municipalities over trivial issues, such as using bilingual town names on official letterheads—illustrating how vague or overreaching language laws can become tools of coercion rather than cultural preservation (ta3 2024, 21:00; 22:00).

Chapter 8: Results

The policy analysis and assessment reveal that the development of language policy by the Slovak government has consistently served to uphold nationalist ideologies. A recurring theme is the perceived threat of anglicisms and foreign expressions, often used as justification for repressive legal measures. As noted by Fiala-Butora, language cannot be effectively strengthened through repression alone (ta3 2024, 06:39–07:39). Although government officials claim that the proposed amendment to the State Language Act is not targeted at minorities—and there have been no direct enforcement actions confirming such targeting—experts such as Fiala-Butora (2024) and Surova (2020) argue that even the current law is discriminatory toward minority communities. Therefore, while the government maintains that the law does not target minorities, our findings show that if such a law were to be implemented, it would have harmful consequences, regardless of whether that intent is explicit. Although the 2024 Amendment has been put on hold and has not yet been officially implemented, it represents a harmful and impractical approach to strengthening language. The Language Law Amendment is presented as a tool of cultural preservation, while this study has shown that it has negative consequences for minority languages and further disregards the historically diverse ethnic and linguistic makeup of Slovakia. While the issue is more nuanced—rather than being a repressive tool to control minorities—it certainly lacks adequate implementation for actually strengthening language. When considering the ideas of Blommaert and Horony Ákos employed in the conceptual framework, I would suggest that while language policies have detrimental outcomes and may be more than just “niched activities,” they are not necessarily deliberately employed as tools of minority control. What has also been presented is the influence of historical grievances and subordination on nationalist ideologies. While these do not explain every aspect, experts such as Regelman suggest that there are clear

ties. “The image of Slovakia as a culturally homogeneous country is thus significantly shattered. It is clear that a universally valid exclusive national identity is a myth. It can apply to some people, but the identity of many other people is layered and changes in time” (Mensinová Politika, 2024). This insight highlights the disconnect between nationalist legal frameworks and the lived realities of a diverse population, reinforcing the need for inclusive language policies and constitutional recognition of minority identities.

Chapter 9: Discussion and Conclusion

While the previous chapters focused on a historical and legal analysis of the development of nationalism present in language laws in Slovakia, this section approaches a broader assessment of their significance. As presented in the results, the amendment to the State Language Act, whilst not officially enforced, carries symbolic significance regarding the extent and influence of Slovak nationalism, which upholds the Constitution and informs its language laws. These laws privilege the Slovak language by claiming dominance over the country of Slovakia, opposing its multi-ethnic realities. As highlighted by János Fiala-Butora, it becomes necessary to assess the current Language Law, which is enforced and can serve as a basis for identifying root causes that manifest in restrictive amendments, as seen in the 2009 and 2024 cases. A thorough discussion of possible implementations and changes will follow.

The current legislation, the Act on the State Language of the Slovak Republic (Act No. 270/1995 Coll.), is characterized as unclear and inadequate, raising the need for a comprehensive framework (Surova 2020). Horony Ákos, the Government Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Republic for National Minorities, also confirms this, stating that many laws would become clearer through a comprehensive law (Paraméter 2024, 29:46). The lack of such a framework—such as a comprehensive Minority Language Law—can be traced to repeated rhetorical dismissals of its necessity, pointing to a deeper political reluctance to institutionalize equal linguistic rights. This reflects the broader structural marginalization of minority issues within Slovak political discourse (Paraméter 2024). Former Government Plenipotentiary for National Minorities Bukovszky László also highlights that political resistance to minority language rights, often framed as unconstitutional, can be traced back to stigmas from the 1990s. This reluctance, seen for example

in the Matovič government as well, illustrates how such views continue to shape policy decisions today (BUKOVSKY LÁSZLÓ, 37:32). Such efforts, resulting in the absence of a law, lead to what Horony Ákos states is authorities and political actors “restricting symbolic expressions, such as flags or bilingual signage, based on discretionary or politicized reasoning.” This leads to the “symbolic invisibility of minorities in public space” and reinforces their secondary status.

The presence of Slovak and its persistence as “unchallenged in legal and administrative practice” infringes not only on minority language rights but also on civil rights through the establishment of a hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy (Surova 2020, author’s translation). Ákos further notes how “People got used to it, they got used to the fact that in certain parts Slovak is dominant and [they are] getting comfortable with their secondary position” (Paraméter 2024, 36:42). Ákos thus presents the example of people switching automatically to Slovak in administration, even though by law they have the right to use their own language. He uses this to argue that there is a disconnect between legal frameworks and actual practice, noting that “the citizen should not adapt to the office, but the office should adapt to the citizen” (Szemtől Szemben Juhos Ferencsel – Beszélgetés Horony Ákos Kisebbségi Kormánybiztossal – 207. Adás 2025, 1:15).

This calls for a comprehensive minority law and a language policy that reflects Slovakia’s multiethnic realities, as presented in the historical background sections. With narratives of fear and threat evoked through nationalism regarding minority languages—especially Hungarian—relevant academic research and public discussion on language policy are required. Tamás Pataki highlights how “There is a strong tendency to ignore these traumas [rather] than to face them. Slovak-Hungarian relations belong in this category,” suggesting the importance of academic discourse and public discussion among civil society.

As Horony Ákos insightfully suggests, when asked about the importance of the presence of signs “Galánta” alongside “Galanta”. He claims that for minority languages to thrive, they must be visible and present in all aspects of public life; otherwise, they risk being confined to the private sphere, leading to a slow erosion of linguistic and cultural identity (Paraméter 2024, 39:00). When individuals internalize the notion that their language is secondary, it shapes their choices and self-perception. As Ákos warns, “A change of language is almost inevitably followed by a change of nationality as well” (Paraméter 2024, 39:24). This shows the consequences of restrictive language policies which carry histories of exclusion even when they seem or are portrayed as neutral.

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