



FUEN - Federal Union of European Nationalities
UFCE - Union Fédéraliste des Communautés Ethniques Européennes
FUEV - Föderalistische Union Europäischer Volksgruppen
Федералистский Союз Европейских Национальных Меньшинств

ARTICLE

The right to ones own native language – the language law in Slovakia

“A language law which makes it a punishable offence to use a language does not belong on the statute books of a European country”, says Hans Heinrich Hansen, president of the FUEN (Federal Union of European Nationalities), commenting on the recently amended language law in Slovakia.

The amendment has created quite a stir in Hungary, and at European level. The already strained bilateral relations between Hungary and Slovakia are now once again at an all time low.

The Budapest newspaper Pester Lloyd writes: “A law was passed in Slovakia back in 1995 which underlined the dominance of the official Slovakian language, and made any official use of other languages in public agencies, public authorities and any non-private areas a punishable offence. The threatened punishments were removed from the law in 2000, also to create a better and more compatible impression at the start of the EU accession negotiations. And now it is precisely this deleted passage that has been written back in once again.”

“Hungarian is not a foreign language in Slovakia, but the native language of around 500,000 Hungarian-speaking citizens. And this is where the actors have made their first main error in reasoning. The nation state of Slovakia must protect and promote the native language of its citizens – also its Hungarian-speaking citizens”, explained Hansen. At the same time the FUEN president points out that the Hungarians are not the only autochthonous minority in Slovakia – the Ruthenians, Roma and the German minority are also affected by this “insane law”, something that has been overlooked in the current Hungarian-Slovakian discussions.

The new law is also an alarming sign for the whole of Europe. “It cements a trend the we in the FUEN have been pointing out with concern for some time: that the minority standards we have achieved are being deviated from. It was a great mistake that the EU did not add a mechanism to the Copenhagen criteria for the acceptance of new members which ensured that the standards achieved are not successively deviated from. This tendency is actually visible in quite a few countries and is fatal for the balance between minorities and majorities. There is still a lack of fundamental understanding that minorities should be seen as an asset and an enrichment, and not as a threat”, says Hansen.

The Budapest paper Pester Lloyd makes quite clear what concrete impact the amended law can have: “All bodies corporate may only use the Slovakian language in non-private areas. In printed matter a 1:1 translation into a second language may be attached to the Slovakian version, but must be printed in smaller letters.



FUEN-President Hans Heinrich Hansen

Contraventions can be punished with fines between 100 and 5000 euros... Mr. Kovács in Kosice goes to his bank manager, Mr. Németh, whom he has known for 30 years, and must (!) speak to him in Slovakian, because otherwise a nationalist informer could denounce him as a malefactor towards the Slovakian nation”, is the example used in Pester Lloyd.

Despite the explosive nature of the language law, the FUEN president calls for verbal disarmament. “The minorities are always caught between two stools when they are exploited in political disputes between nations. When politicians in Hungary argue with politicians in Slovakia, it is always to the detriment of the minorities”, continues Hansen, who calls upon the politicians involved to sit down at the table with the minorities and work out compromises as equal partners. “But to do this it means that all the parties involved will have to prepared to give a bit where their positions are concerned”, says Hansen, who also warns against the “Greater Hungary rumblings” that one hears and reads of over and again.

The FUEN president recommends that the decision makers take a trip to Finland to see for themselves how they deal with the language of the Swedish-speaking population there. “There they see it as an asset, not as a threat. That should be their benchmark,” is Hansen’s advice.

The newly elected president of the European Parliament Jan Buzek has also set an example, criticising the law as being “not in the spirit of the European Union”. MEP Edit Bauer (EVP) (a Hungarian from Slovakia) and Kinga Gál (EVP) (Hungarian) have written to the high commissioner for national minorities Kurt Vollerbaek asking him to intervene.

Jan Diedrichsen