[SK] Controversial Amendment to the State Language Law

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The Slovak Parliament approved a controversial amendment to Law No. 270/1995 of Coll. on the State Language of the Slovak Republic of 15 November 1995 (“State Language Law“), proposed by the Government on 30 June 2009. The Amendment, i.e., Law No. 318/2009 of Coll., shall come into effect on 1 September 2009. The reason for it is that the standard of oral culture in Slovakia is deteriorating.

As the provisions concerning sanctioning (i.e., § 10 of the State Language Law) were repealed in 1999 due to imperfections in the provisions, the Ministry of Culture (“Ministry“) - as supervisor of adherence to the obligations resulting from the State Language Law - has since been entitled only to notify violations to the legal entities and natural persons concerned and to require a remedy for such illegalities. If the imperfections were not removed, the Ministry lacked competence to impose fines. The Amendment enables the Ministry to exercise stricter supervision on the proper use of the Slovak language. Consequently, if imperfections appear and are not corrected after repeated calls by the Ministry, a fine of EUR 100 to EUR 5,000 may be imposed. Fines imposed will accrue to the State cultural fund, Pro Slovakia.

The amended Law shall apply to State authorities, authorities of territorial self-administration and other State administrative authorities, legal entities and natural persons. The Amendment introduces, inter alia, changes concerning media law, mainly in regard to radio and TV broadcasting, and determines not only the use of the State language, which is the language in which radio and TV programmes are broadcast in the whole Slovak Republic, but also specifies exceptions to this rule, such as the use of the Czech language, i.e., a language that fulfils the requirement of essential understandability from the point of view of the State language. Some exceptions include the possibility of regional broadcasting in a minority language.

In accordance with the Amendment, signs, advertising and announcements providing information to the public must be written first in Slovak followed by any foreign language in the same or smaller font size.

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The Amendment has been criticised, particularly by Hungarian Slovaks, who say it limits the rights of ethnic minorities to use their native language in official dealings with the authorities. The opposition Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) has rejected the Amendment, describing it as putting citizens who belong to a minority at a disadvantage and violating the principle of equality. The Ministry maintains the contrary saying that the Amendment would not punish anyone for using ethnic minority languages. National minorities of Poles and Ruthenians in Slovakia do not consider the possible impact of the Amendment to be a potential threat to either their everyday activities or communication in a public context

On 21/22 July 2009 the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities received delegations from Slovakia and Hungary to discuss the Amendment.

OSCE press release, OSCE minorities' commissioner discusses amendments to Slovakia's language law

http://www.osce.org/hcnm/item_1_38979.html

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