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Language Law of Slovakia: Amendment in 2009 – in the Eyes of Polish Press

Abstrakt (Nowelizacja słowackiej ustawy o języku państwowym z 2009 r. w oczach polskiej prasy). Celem przeprowadzonych badań jest zaprezentowanie opinii i komentarzy zamieszczonych w polskiej prasie po przyjęciu na Słowacji w 2009 r. kontrowersyjnej nowelizacji ustawy o języku państwowym. Przedstawiona analiza koncentruje się nie tylko na artykułach z największych polskich dzienników i czasopism, ale również porównuje te artykuły z kilkoma ekspertyzami publikowanymi przez polski think-tank zajmujący się problemami Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich). Pytaniami zasadniczymi w niniejszym artykule są: do jakiego stopnia polscy dziennikarze podzielają opinie Słowaków i Węgrów? Czy istnieją jakieś podobieństwa pomiędzy stanowiskami przedstawionymi przez dziennikarzy a tymi reprezentowanymi w ekspertyzach? Wreszcie, jaki obraz konfliktu wokół nowelizacji ustawy wykreowały polskie media? Artykuł ukazuje ambiwalentne reakcje mediów, począwszy od ignorowania konfliktu, a skończywszy na publikacji dogłębnych analiz.

Abstract. The aim of the research is to present opinions and comments expressed in Polish press after the controversial amendment of the language law in Slovakia in 2009 has been in force. The presented analysis concentrates not only on articles published in the biggest Polish newspapers and magazines but also compares these articles to several professional analyses published by Polish think-tank dealing with Central-European issues (Centre for Eastern Studies). The key questions raised here are: to what extent are Polish journalists sharing both Slovakian and Hungarian point of view? Are there any similarities between the point of view of the biggest newspapers and the professional researchers? Finally, what is the general picture of the conflict over the amendment created in Polish press? The paper shows ambivalent attitudes of Polish newspapers ranging from ignoring the conflict to providing in-depth analyses.

In my paper, I would like to analyze the articles published in some Polish newspapers between 1st of June and 1st of December, 2009. They respond to opinions and comments on amendments of Slovakian language law which took place on the 1st of June and entered into force on the 1st of September. I have analyzed publications from

the three biggest non-tabloid newspapers: *Dziennik*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, and six weekly magazines: *Gość Niedzielny*, *Newsweek Polska*, *Polityka*, *Przegląd*, *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Wprost*. In addition, I have used the articles from *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich* (Centre for Eastern Studies), the Polish think-tank, as a base of comparison between opinions of the professional researchers, who deal with Eastern Europe issues, and the journalists.

The most important questions I wanted to explain were: firstly, how much did the Polish newspapers write about the amendment and Hungarian-Slovakian conflict in this period; secondly, was the information objective and balanced; thirdly, were the articles quoting sources from one or from the both countries; and finally, was the opinion generally expressed in the articles similar to the comments provided by the professional researchers?

Therefore, my paper will consist of four parts. I will begin with a few remarks on the background of the amendment and will provide basic information about the Hungarian-Slovakian conflict in 2009. Then, I will compare the articles published during the analyzed period in three newspapers. Thirdly, I will shortly discuss the result of an analysis of the weekly magazines. In the end, I will try to answer the question whether the information published in the press is comparable to the publications of the Centre for Eastern Studies.

Let me begin with providing some information on the Hungarian-Slovakian conflict. Around 10% of the population of Slovakia are Hungarians. Most of them use Hungarian as their first language and some can hardly speak any Slovakian. The majority of the Slovakian Hungarians live in the southern part of the country concentrating also in the bigger cities like Komárno/Komárom or Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely. They have their representation in the parliament. In 2009 it was a Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK/MKP) led by Pál Csáky. Since the elections in 2006, SMK has been the opposing party while the government consisted of the representatives of three parties. The biggest party was a left-wing Smer (Direction), with the prime minister Robert Fico, and then two smaller ones: SNS (Slovakian National Party) and HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) with the former prime minister Vladimír Mečiar. At the same time Hungary was ruled by the coalition of MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) and, definitely smaller, SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats). Since April 2009 a socialist Gordon Bajnai has been the prime minister.

When talking about the historical background we should underline that there have been unsatisfactory relations between both countries since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Actually, the relations were already complicated within the Austrian and then Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy: Hungarians were under the Austrian rule but were dominating in local political and cultural institutions. Slovaks started to build their national identity in 19th century in opposition to Hungarians, not to Austrians. As a consequence, the struggle for freedom of both nations resulted to be contradictory: Slovaks supported rather Austrians than the Hungarians perceiving autonomy within the Habsburg Empire as more probable and potentially wider than the sovereignty offered by visions of St. Stephen's Monarchy.

Since 1993 there have been numerous problems that sprang up in the Hungarian-Slovakian relations: the first language law from 1995 (not so controversial, as it did not include specific fines), local conflicts concerning language of signs, subjects taught in schools or language of saint masses to name just a few. Situation improved between 1998 and 2006 when SMK became a member of the governing coalition. In 2006 SMK became an opposing party while the government was formed by three parties mentioned above. Two of them used openly anti-Hungarian slogans. The prime minister, Robert Fico, did not present so radical approach. He occasionally repeated some of the demands of his colleagues, though. Hungarian minority reacted in 2007 in the inner elections at SMK: Pál Csáky beat Béla Bugár, promoting much more aggressive language and more open demands concerning autonomy.

The language law from 1995 was in fact a dead letter until June 2009 when Slovak Parliament decided to accept the vast amendment. The most controversial rule of the late one was, i.e., specifying the fines that could be imposed to those breaking the law with maximum amount of 5000 euro. However, most of the rules are not precise and detailed. As a result it has not been clear how and to what extent enforce the law in everyday life. In both Slovakian and Hungarian press there were numerous opinions, varying from the enthusiastic support to eager rejection and repugnance. To show just few examples of the negative attitudes we can recall some incidents like a refusal to Hungarian president to run a visit in Slovakian Komarno on August 20th or a cancelled match in Dunajská Streda (due to a high risk of riots between nationalist hooligans from both countries). The amendment entered into force on 1st September, 2009.

In the second part we shall analyze what Polish daily newspapers wrote on the amendment and the consequences of their doings.

In *Dziennik*, there was no single article concerning the problem. Several articles about Hungarian or Slovakian issues were published but there were no publication presenting tensions in bilateral relations. Obviously we could not find any explanation of the tense situation either.

Gazeta Wyborcza published 4 articles (one of them was an interview with two Ministers of Foreign Affairs) and 4 very short news (2–3 sentences). What differed them from other newspapers was a rather strong language (especially by Luboš Palata), marked by describing Slovakian government as nationalists and radical right-wing Hungarian Jobbik as close to fascism. The interview turned to be very valuable and showed the perception of both governments and explained the attitude of the official authorities.

In last of the three newspapers, *Rzeczpospolita*, 12 articles concerning conflict were published. Most of them referred to the amendment. Articles were based mainly on PAP (Polish Press Agency) communicates and Andrzej Niewiadowski's reports from Bratislava. Most of them were short although contained a lot of information. Their language was mostly neutral but a wide use of the radical quotes from the both sides were noticeable. There was neither a definite condemnation of SNS or Jobbik nor describing Smer as populists.

To summarize, a number of articles might be called satisfying only in the case of *Rzeczpospolita* as there were too few in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. We could observe a worrying lack of interest in regional issues by *Dziennik*. The information was rather objective and more critical in *Gazeta Wyborcza* than in *Rzeczpospolita*. Unfortunately, no explanation of the background was provided. Moreover, the causes of the conflict were not mentioned at all. What turned to be grotesque was the obvious lack of use of sources in both languages – Katalin Szili, Speaker of Hungarian Parliament, appeared as “Schilli” in *Rzeczpospolita* and as “Sziliova”¹ in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

The following part of the paper concentrates on the analysis of articles from the biggest weekly magazines. Generally, newspapers representing this part of the market do not show lot of interest in regional issues. News from the world clearly concentrate on the biggest countries and those important for the world system of international relations, i.e. USA, Russia, Germany, and Arab countries. There were no more than one long or two shorter articles concerning Slovakian-Hungarian conflict in the analyzed period (5 months) what seems very worrying considering the potential importance of both countries in bilateral relations with Poland or common actions realized within the framework of Visegrad Group.

Polityka, the most popular newspaper, is known for its well-written and professional articles on international relations. It published an article by Tomasz Maćkowiak, “Boiling goulash” which criticized both countries, using many emotional expressions: “Sólyom behaved like a harmed, innocent baby”, “Slovakian government which consists of left-wing populists and nationalist”, “impression was so disgusting, that the politics came up to their minds”. An overall impression was a bit similar to this represented by *Gazeta Wyborcza* as it concentrated on actual events described in details. On the other hand a question (and of course answer) why the conflicted began at all was not raised.

In *Gość Niedzielny*, the second biggest weekly, situation was a bit specific: it is a catholic magazine that only occasionally provides articles on international relations and if it does they are mainly concerning issues somehow connected to religion. *Gość*'s journalists did not cope with Slovakian and Hungarian affairs at all in the second half of 2009.

The third of the analyzed weekly magazines was the Polish edition of *Newsweek*. It contained one analysis by Jarosław Giziński (“Carried away bridges”) which was definitely one of the two most professional articles in magazines showing a wider perspective. The questions raised were usually neglected by authors, however, being essential for readers they let them understand the problem. The questions can be recalled as: what does the conflict mean to Poland and what is the origin of the conflict and its historical context? Although a friendly attitude towards Hungary in an article was clearly noticeable, we cannot speak about anti-Slovakian attitude. Rather it was a trail to frigid, balanced point of view aimed at objective evaluation of the events.

¹ Such feminine ending is not used in Polish while it is obligatory in Czech and Slovakian.

The author quoted opinions of both Slovakian and Hungarian experts and therefore it was balanced also from the point of view of information sources.

In *Wprost* we could find two short articles referring to Slovakia refusing Hungarian president to enter its territory on 20th August 2009 and a Hungarian complaint to the European Commission concerning this event. Based on PAP information, articles were strictly informational and, unfortunately, did not refer to the language law or broader context at all. Such an attitude might result in leaving a reader in a state of misunderstanding the causes of the incident.

In a left-wing *Przegląd* there were no articles mentioning the case. As the magazine concentrates on events taking place in Poland, therefore an international section is relatively less important. However, it is worrying that there was not even a short note explaining the situation considering the fact that Slovakia is Poland's neighbor country and both Slovakia and Hungary are cooperating with Poland within the international bodies.

Tygodnik Powszechny was the last of the analyzed weekly magazines. According to its self-definition it is a catholic and social-cultural magazine. It has smaller circulation than other magazines but is highly influential especially among liberally oriented, left- or central-left-wing Catholics. That is why it was included as a subject of this analysis. *Tygodnik* is responsible for a well-prepared, reliable article by Patrycja Bukalska "When Hungarian visits a doctor". The text gathers the incidents that took place in August 2009 and refers broadly to the amendment. It rightly explains the misunderstandings and dubious rules of the amended law as well as unfounded accuses of both sides, trying to avoid any judgment. However, Bukalska critically describes Fico and his cabinet as "populist prime minister who made coalition with nationalists and Meciar's supporters". The overall impression is that the Hungarian point of view might be closer to the author's opinions as she refers only to Slovakian experts' comments. In fact, the balanced implications of the article might be also perceived as very close to anti-government Slovakian experts' opinions.

In conclusion, the impression after analyzing six important opinion-forming magazines in Poland cannot be optimistic. Two newspapers, for which international issues are less important, did not mention the law amendment and the conflict at all. One, *Wprost*, concentrated only on one incident ignoring the problem of the law amendment. Three magazines published longer articles. The article in *Polityka* concentrated heavily on the current issues thus it was rather of a reporting than explaining nature. The author was, probably because of it, very critical towards the conflict and its participants. Fortunately two very good articles were also published. In *Newsweek* we could read about both historical context and possible consequences to Poland and opinions of Slovakian and Hungarian experts were included. In *Tygodnik Powszechny* the author widely commented the unclear statements upon the amendment and also referred to the historical context. She successfully managed to represent a balanced point of view.

The last part of the paper is a short comparison of think-tank comments and press articles. The Centre for Eastern Studies is a state-funded think-tank providing re-

search on Central- and Eastern-European agenda. Between July and December 2009 it published 5 articles and 1 bigger analysis, concerning the Slovakian-Hungarian relations. They were written by experts usually knowing both languages, in a CE weekly (a weekly analytical newsletter concentrating on Central European issues). Mariusz Bocian, one of the experts, coped with problems concerning the amendment, its consequences and the incidents.

The Centre's publications contained much more thorough information i.e. dates, names, and short explanation of political situation. An important part of the publications was evaluating influence of the events on Polish situation (with the exception of Newsweek article, the Polish press did not refer to this). Comments were balanced, avoiding publicist tone and subjective language. The number of words, when comparing to the articles in the press, was similar and still it provided much more information and avoided expressing opinions.

Let me gather and express once more some of the conclusions. To begin with, we have to express anxiety concerning the general level and number of information provided by Polish press when it comes to the analyzed conflict. It seems probable that this attitude could be observed generally when it comes to articles about Central-European countries. Such an assumption would need further analysis, though. Some of the newspapers simply ignored the case as if respective countries were of no meaning to Poland. Maybe there was a simple reason of such a situation, namely lack of experts? Others wrote about the conflict but the articles were based on short agency news from PAP or on the foreign, non-Slovakian and non-Hungarian sources. In spite of this unsatisfactory situation, there are some bright points. 12 shorter articles from Rzeczpospolita (including reports from Bratislava) guaranteed the wide perspective and provided a lot of information to its readers. Interviews with Péter Balázs and Miroslav Lajčák in *Gazeta Wyborcza* were probably the best way to learn the arguments of both sides. Two analyses from weekly magazines gave also a possibility to learn the facts about the conflict as well as its background. To sum up, it has to be said that it was possible to receive a lot of information concerning the conflict connected to the amendment of Slovakian language law by reading Polish press. There were balanced articles containing many facts. The articles shared the same opinion level with the expert publications. However, such publications could have only be found in some of the newspapers. All Polish specialists and friends of Central-European countries have to answer the question: has everything been done to provide data about our neighbors and important partners? Could we accept the risk that some of the Polish readers will understand the causes on conflict while the others would not even know that they exist? That question is a figure of speech. We all have a lot to do, yet.

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