
Bilingual road signs in Dunaszerdahely

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Keywords: minority names, Slovakia, bilingualism, place names

Abstract:

Similarly to other countries neighbouring Hungary, Slovakia has a Hungarian minority. As in Romania and Serbia, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia makes up the local majority in many settlements. Large parts of southern Slovakia are inhabited by Hungarians. In these areas the Hungarian minority enjoys the rights to use Hungarian as the local official language, which also extends to the use of place names and thus are regarded as official. The signposting of these place names is particularly interesting in Slovakia, as these differ from the way it is done in other countries surrounding Hungary.

The signposting of place names is done on separate equally sized sign boards for Slovak and Hungarian place names on the same pole using black lettering on a white background. In the past minority names were signposted using white lettering on a blue background underneath the Slovak name and smaller than the Slovak sign. The previously used Hungarian boards are in the process of being changed. The use of separate boards for signposting minority names is only done in Slovakia and Hungary. Other countries neighbouring Hungary signpost all official names on the same board. Minority names are signposted on all roads both when entering and leaving a settlement. Both Hungarian and Slovak railway station names are signposted in white on blue background.

In contrast to other states neighbouring Hungary, Slovakia does not use any minority names on direction signs. These signs have a blue background with white letters, unless they are placed on a motorway, in which case they have a green background with white letters. While these signs are the same throughout the country and are placed in public areas by the government, one town has used its own initiative to signpost Hungarian minority names and Hungarian exonyms on direction signs. This town in Hungarian is called Dunaszerdahely and in Slovak Dunajská Streda, where both of these names are official. They left the official government direction signs untouched, but placed “information signs” few meters before the official government signs, that show directions and use both Slovak and Hungarian names. These signs have a lighter blue background than the official government signs, and use black letters instead of white ones. This is due to legal reason, since no municipality or private initiative may place signs in public places that are identical to official road sign. The directions are always shown by arrows and no traffic circles are depicted. The signs show all Hungarian names to the places concerned, regardless if they are endonyms or exonyms. All intersections in the city have such a sign, usually before reaching the official government sign, but in few cases it is after the official sign.

The majority of inhabitants of the town are Hungarians, which makes the Hungarians who are a minority at a national level a local majority. These signs can be observed in the town for over five years, yet no other settlement in Slovakia has decided to use this initiative themselves, including other towns and villages where the Hungarian minority makes up the local majority. The author has observed this since 2016 and no changes happened: the signs in Dunaszerdahely/Dunajská Streda remained in place and were repaired if needed, while no further signs were erected in other places with large minority population. While many other bilingual signs like street name signs and direction signs to local tourist attractions have become bilingual in just about all settlements with a Hungarian minority in Slovakia, the parallel directions signs have remained a unique feature of Dunaszerdahely.



Figure 1. Bilingual signs in Dunaszerdahely showing directions. These are not official direction signs, hence are officially considered “information signs”

When one enters the city one is greeted by a large sign Welcoming the visitor. The greeting is written first in Hungarian and the name Dunaszerdahely is used. Underneath the same greeting is written in Slovak, the name Dunajská Streda is used. This is followed by German and English greetings. The town’s German name is Niedermarkt, which is an exonym. The German text however uses the Slovak name Dunajská Streda. The Slovak name is also used in the English greeting, but one has to add that the town has no English exonym. It can however be said that the large greeting sign only uses endonyms since both the Slovak and the Hungarian name are endonyms. Underneath the greeting the sister towns are listed. On top, using larger letters the Hungarian name is shown, while underneath, if the town is not in Hungary the name the the given country’s official language is shown in smaller letters. The Cyrillic letters are transcribed into Latin letters. One exception is the town of Zenta in Vojvodina, where the Serbain name is missing, which is Senta when transcribed into Latin script. Taking into consideration how the sign is constructed, this is probably just a mistake. The names of the Sister towns are also displayed in front of the town hall on signs showing the direction and distance to these towns and cities. These are bilingual, using the names in the official state language of the country concerned, and also use the Hungarian minority name or exonym when such is available.

It is however important that the town is regarded as a cultural centre for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, especially those living in western Slovakia. In fact its football team attracts the Hungarians from all over Slovakia as well as some from Hungary, turning even football games into cultural events, often with singers and bands playing before the game. It is probably this very strong cultural identity which has lead to this type of signposting of minority names and exonyms.

In general one can say that the direction signs used in Dunaszerdahely unique not only in Slovakia, but also in Central Europe. So far no other example can be found where the local community created a parallel direction sign system that showed minority names and exonyms. Many examples exist where the official government signs contain such names, but in such cases no parallel signposting system exists.