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Media Contact: Katrina Lantos Swett 603.226.3636



Statement on the Restrictive Language Law Recently Adopted in Slovakia

Free and democratic societies share the characteristics of tolerance, respect for diversity, and a robust protection of human and minority rights. With its recent enactment of a highly restrictive and punitive language law, Slovakia has taken yet another disturbing step away from these democratic values toward intolerance and discrimination. Under the provisions of this oppressive law, Slovakia becomes the only EU member state, post accession, to legislate financial penalties on some of its citizens for speaking their native language in public.

This law violates Slovakia's obligations under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities as well as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. At a more basic level it is an affront to the human rights of the minority populations in Slovakia, particularly the more than 500,000 members of the historic Hungarian community.

Since their introduction on September 1, 2009, the punitive measures of the Slovak Language Law have caused widespread intimidation in Hungarian-inhabited communities of Slovakia. In schools, post offices, shops and on public transportation, ethnic Hungarians no longer risk speaking Hungarian, because Slovak citizens order them to "speak Slovak in Slovakia," or threaten to report them to the authorities.

Although Slovakia has pledged to international bodies not to implement the law until next year, the Slovak Commerce Authority has launched an official investigation and threatened to impose the law's punitive sanctions (between 100 and 5,000 Euros) against the Hungarian weekly *Szabad Újság* (Free Newspaper) for billboards advertising the Hungarian newspaper to Hungarian readers in Hungarian. Authorities have called the mayor of Nagytárkány (*Velké Trakany*) to account for making public service announcements to the 99 percent Hungarian-inhabited village in the Hungarian language.

The Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice calls on Slovakia to abandon this ill-advised and discriminatory law and urges the United States Congress to press for reversal of these severe and senseless restrictions on the rights of minorities in Slovakia.

About the Lantos Foundation

The mission of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice is to advance the cause of human rights in American foreign policy and to be a vital voice standing up for the nation's most important values of decency, dignity, freedom, and justice in every corner of the world. In so doing, it hopes to carry on Congressman Lantos' remarkable legacy of service to humanity. For more information visit www.lantosfoundation.org.