



HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SLOVAK ASSOCIATION IN POLAND

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Abstract:

This research traces out the historical genesis and institutional development of the Slovak Association in Poland as a prominent ethnic minority representative as well as a cultural self-preservation institution. The study analyses the role of Slovak statehood and nation through its development from post-World War II, the socialist era, and into contemporary EU integration, interrogating how it has served as a repository for sustaining Slovak culture, language and transnational cultural ties. The paper puts the Association in the broader debate about nationalism, multiculturalism, and minority rights through historical analysis and literature synthesis. Finally, the findings suggest both enduring challenges as well as strategic adaptations in how ethnic institutions negotiate state frameworks and help create cultural diversity in modern Europe.

Keywords: Slovak Association in Poland, ethnic minorities, national identity, multiculturalism, minority rights, cultural preservation, Central Europe, transnationalism

1. Introduction

The Slovak minority in Poland is one of the legally established national minorities in Poland and has its roots that grew hundreds of years ago, especially in the southern areas of Spiš (Spisz) and Orava (Orawa). Polish control over these areas acquired after complex geopolitical realignments following World War I and World War II, respectively, were parts of the historical Kingdom of Hungary. Despite periods of marginalisation, assimilation pressures, especially under socialism, the Slovak community in Poland has maintained a distinct linguistic, cultural and religious identity. Returning from the end of the national independence war and from the emerging ideological regimes, the

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adoption of institutional mechanisms to maintain the identity of minorities was of primary importance, with particular reference to the organized representation of culture, such as the Slovak Association in Poland, Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce.

The significance of this study lies in the development analysed, considering determinants of the political and historical transformation of Central Europe as a whole. In this case, the transition from the authoritarian socialist regime to democratic governance and later to EU membership exerted an influence on the policymaking vis-à-vis minority policy and the status and functions of such associations as these. Understanding how such organisations function in the state structures, promote rights, and preserve culture provide a glimpse into the capacity of ethnic minorities to survive and to act in a post-conflict and post-authoritarian state.

The aim of the study is to investigate the historical emergence, development, and contemporary role of the Slovak Association in Poland within the socio-political framework of minority governance and cultural autonomy.

1.1 Objectives

- To trace the institutional development of the Slovak Association from its inception to the present day.
- To assess the Association's role in preserving Slovak linguistic and cultural identity in Poland.
- To evaluate the challenges and adaptations faced by the Association in response to political and demographic shifts.

The focus of this research is the history of the Slovak Association post-World War II within Polish national borders. The focus of the analytical lens, however, is on the internal organisational dynamics and the external political environment in Poland, while cross-border relations with Slovakia are treated. This is limited by restricted internal archival records and limited secondary literature in English. The paper begins with a review of the related literature, methodology, historical context, institutional analysis, thematic discussion, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Scholarship on Ethnic Minorities in Poland

During the post-socialist transition and the accession of Poland in the European Union, the discourse on ethnic minorities in Poland has developed on the back of broader political changes. Balogun (2020) describes this hegemonic national narrative as Polish-centrism, which scholars have critiqued for its persistence, as it centers ethnic homogeneity and silences minority experiences. This narrative, which Balogun (2020) argues, connects to this mono-ethnic understanding of Polish identity and thereby inhibits inclusionary policymaking and is also a form of institutional cultural exclusion. Consequently, its significance is apt, like the case for which it is so relevant – that of the Slovak (people's movement) minority, whose historical sojourn is overshadowed by dominant state discourses.

On the contrary, Jaskulowski and Pawlak (2020) address the lived experiences of high-skilled migrants and demonstrate that racialisation processes do not only encompass traditional populations of minorities. Their findings do not directly excavate autochthonous minorities; however, by exposing structural levity within Polish bureaucratic and social institutions, they raise the question of structural inequalities in Poland. Further to Balogun (2020), this insight reinforces her thesis, showing that national identity construction in Poland remains exclusionary, even at what was a period of multiculturalism.

On another front, Hesová (2021) focuses on the politics of culture wars and populism in Central Europe and argues that current minority issues are linked with ideological battles in nationalism, sovereignty, identity, and the EU conception. Her work on ethnic minorities' politicisation as wider socio-political symbols is underscored. At the same time, Pędziwiatr and Magdziarz (2023) note a selective solidarity in Poland's refugee response, with Ukrainians in particular guaranteed selective support that moves in line with policies of accepting minorities toward people perceived as culturally proximate. More broadly, these studies together suggest a scholarly consensus on the ambivalent ways in which Poland purportedly accepted but did not embrace ethnic diversity in ways that were legally recognised but generally culturally construed and socially implemented through a mix of exclusionary inclusion practices and nationalistic discourse.

2.2 Historical Research on Slovak Communities in Central Europe

As a case study of their development, investigation into Slovak communities across Central Europe now increasingly gives attention to the horizontal constructs of heritage, landscape and political marginality in transnational frameworks. According to the Chrastina et al. (2020) study of the Slovak exclave Čív (Piliscsév) in Hungary, rural heritage, identity and land use changes are interplayed. Preservation of Slovak cultural landscapes is not only an environmental issue according to them, but also it is a political act of the minorities' visibility and resistance to assimilationist pressure. The accent placed upon territorial identity and their focus on spatial rootedness indicate how spatial rootedness translates into long-term ethnic resilience.

On the other hand, Jaszczak et al. (2021) examine peripheral towns in Slovakia, treated as the periphery of the L2, through spatial and socio-economic interdependence, first of the towns and then the decentralising centre, the town in the capital of the L2. Cultural continuity in these borderland regions is sometimes a result of cross-border rather than centralised national policy, they say. It opens up a different kind of historiography where it was previously state-centred, and it propounds their argument that Slovak minorities have always been able to survive through a regional network.

In contrast to Albuquerque et al. (2022), Slovak settlements are located within a broader commentary on the management of cultural heritage, and yet, the author(s) attend to community building at Europe's peripheries. Their work contributes to suggesting that minority communities such as Slovaks have units of self-organisation and symbolic resistance based on which they can fight against marginalisation. On the other

hand, EU cultural frameworks are claimed to present opportunities and risks as they can lead not to genuine inclusion but to the folklorisation of ethnicity.

According to Slámová and Belčáková (2020) in their historical study of Slovak viticultural landscapes, the emphasis placed on agrarian traditions places them as the transmission medium of identity. The findings provide another confirmation that material culture, or landscape use, serves as an essential archive of ethnic history. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Slovak communities in Central Europe have used land, heritage, and minority politics to negotiate their identity, but not their identity against a stark nationalist narrative.

2.3 Studies on Cultural Preservation and Minority Associations

Scholars have devoted more and more attention to the institutional role of minority associations in preserving the cultural identity of people and promoting cross-border interaction. As Kurowska-Pysz and Puksas assert regarding the examination of the Polish Lithuanian borderland, minority led cultural cooperation is a soft power mechanism for both preserving ethnic heritage and regional diplomacy. As cultural organisations operating at the interfaces of cultural diplomacy and transnational governance, they claim that cultural organisations that are based in ethnic minority communities tend to operate in such frameworks. The significance of this model offers a parallel of the way the Slovak Association replicates itself in Poland through cross-border activities, which are strategic cultural advocacy within a constrained national space.

For instance, Bonet and Zamorano (2021) take a more critical position on the autonomy of minority institutions under non liberal democratic regimes; they focus on Poland and Hungary as case studies. They maintain that increasingly consensual cultural policies are being controlled from the centre and operate with an ideological underpinning that reabsorbs or marginalises minority associations placed outside the sanctioned narrative. As their framework raises pertinent concerns as to the operational space of the Slovak Association in a political environment that selectively tolerates cultural heterogeneity but fails to truly embrace it, individuals are left to contemplate this issue carefully.

In their description of Ukrainian diaspora formation, Trzeczyńska and Demel (2025) give a nuanced picture to the discussion of diaspora formation in the Polish premise, the context of the Ukrainian community in Poland. They contend that the cultural preservation efforts tend to oscillate between expressions of shared civic culture and tendencies towards national naturalism, where ethnic distinctiveness is used to others. Although the Slovak community in Poland is not a new diaspora, the case of this community provides some understanding of the tensions between integration and the cultural self-determination through which many minority associations seek to fulfill their mission, including the modern Slovak Association. Together, these works highlight how minority associations pursue cultural preservation practices and how nationalistic sentiments affecting many political climates, centralisations and shifts in multicultural approaches serve to both threaten and facilitate the cultural preservation schemes.

2.4 Gap in the Literature

However, very little scholarly attention has been devoted to the development of institutional and institutional histories of certain minority organisations, such as the Slovak Association in Poland. There are already several studies of national minority frameworks (Balogun, 2020) or cultural heritage and transnational cooperation (Chrastina et al., 2020), for example. Yet very few try to understand how ethnic minority associations develop under different regimes, from socialist to democratic, to EU integration. The Slovak minority in Poland (being autochthonous and historically settled) has been a relatively marginalised minority in Polish historiography and studies of minorities. The aim of this research is, therefore, to fill a significant gap in Slovak research on the Association in Poland by undertaking a longitudinal, institutionally oriented analysis incorporating historical, political and socio-cultural dimensions. Through doing so, it affects a more nuanced understanding of ethnic institutional agency, especially in the context of the contested Central European narratives of national identity, sovereignty, and cultural pluralism. This thesis contributes to the broader literature on minority governance, identity politics and the longevity of cultural institutions in changing political contexts by specialising in an underempiricized subfield of minority studies: an essential yet understudied minority in a critical geopolitical region.

3. Material and Methods

This paper takes a qualitative, document-oriented historical analysis approach to explore the evolution and the role of the Slovak Association in Poland. Then it uses a mixture of primary and secondary sources, including archival documents, publications by the Slovak Association, academic journal articles and newspaper articles. This methodology allows for a critical look at the Association's evolution over time under different political regimes, giving ground to an understanding of how an ethnic minority organisation develops an identity and legitimacy in nation-state contexts (Seuring, Stella and Stella, 2021). Archival materials, and especially those that were generated during the socialist and the early post-socialist times, are necessary to discern the continuity in institutional legacy and its change in strategic objectives. Like publications by the Association, newsletters and cultural bulletins offer insights on internal narratives of cultural preservation and advocacy. This is further contextualised through scholarly articles and press coverage of these efforts in a broader discussion on minority rights, nationalism, and regional integration (Wallwey and Kajfez 2023). Due to archival inaccessibility, institutional bias and little English language research, the methodology strikes a balance between institutional and critical sources and provides a good basis for historical analysis.

3.1 Historical Background of Slovaks in Poland

Historically, Slovaks in Poland are found mainly in the southern border regions, and especially in Spiš (Spisz) and Orava (Orawa). After World War I, these were uncontracted territories of the Kingdom of Hungary subject to shifting borders, which joined the

Second Polish Republic according to the Treaty of Trianon (1920). These communities, which resided in these regions, had strong linguistic and cultural ties with Slovakia while being a political minority within Poland's framework as a nationality (Świątek, 2020). In the interwar period, Slovaks experienced marginalisation due to Poland's centralist policies, which prioritised national homogenisation. However, it was in the aftermath of World War II that the Slovak community faced the most significant restructuring. The post-war border stabilisation, confirmed by the Potsdam Agreement and subsequent treaties, left these communities under firm Polish administration. While Slovakia became part of the Czechoslovak socialist federation, Slovaks in Poland were subjected to the policies of the People's Republic of Poland, which approached minority affairs with ambivalence and often repression (Diggitmagazine, 2017).

During the socialist era, Slovaks were officially recognised as a national minority, yet their cultural and linguistic rights were inconsistently supported. State control over cultural expression meant that many Slovak traditions were either folklorised or subsumed under state-sanctioned narratives. Institutional representation was limited, and education in the Slovak language was constrained, particularly during periods of political tension between Warsaw and Bratislava (Britannica, 2025a). Despite these challenges, Slovaks in Poland maintained a distinct identity, partly due to their geographic concentration and persistent cross-border familial and cultural ties. Their situation reflects broader patterns in Central Europe's minority politics, where ethnic identity often intersected with Cold War geopolitics and ideologies of socialist internationalism (EACEA, 2023). The unique legal-political positioning of Slovaks—autochthonous yet externally oriented—laid the groundwork for institutional developments in the post-socialist era (Perný, 2021). The Slovak minority's historical trajectory thus reveals a complex entanglement of border politics, cultural survival, and ideological constraint, which ultimately culminated in the creation of their own formal representative organisation during the twilight of socialist Poland.

3.2 Formation and Early Development of the Slovak Association

The Slovak Association in Poland (Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce) was formally established in 1957, during the relatively liberal post-Stalinist thaw. Its founding occurred under the auspices of the Office for Religious Affairs and national minorities, which oversaw minority organisations within a strictly centralised and ideologically regulated framework. The Association was granted legal status as a cultural and educational institution representing Slovaks residing predominantly in the southern regions of Poland (Świątek, 2020). Initially, the Association articulated modest goals: preserving the Slovak language and traditions, promoting cultural events, and publishing literature in Slovak. Most members were older generations and knee-jerk community leaders who had close prewar ties to Slovakism. While legally recognised, the organisation still had to work under the strict boundaries of ideological conformity established optimally by state demanded socialist national policy (Diggitmagazine, 2017).

The Association's output was released to the public, and the state monitored and occasionally censored it. For instance, its publications had to be censored on a state level,

and ethnonationalist distinctiveness had to be expressed overtly in favour of class-based solidarity and socialist unity. It is fitting that this should represent the paradox of minority representation under socialism in that it was visible, yet there was no building of an autonomous identity (Britannica, 2025a). Our Foundation laid the important foundation for future cultural revival. By functioning as a rare platform for Slovaks in Poland to meet, express cultural continuity, make appeals, and defend linguistic and educational rights, albeit cautiously, it amounted to something unique. Its survival through the post-1989 democratic transition attests to its adaptive resilience within the limitations of authoritarian pluralism.

3.3 Cultural and Educational Initiatives

During its entire existence, the Slovak Association in Poland focused on the preservation of cultural identity and education. It has been one of the most important, if not the most important, contributions to the creation and support of the Slovak language primary schools in the southern Polish Southern, but most importantly Jurgów, Krempachy, Kacwin, Nowa Biała, Łapsze Wyżne, Niedzica. Between continuing to act as vehicles for language transmission that reinforce ethnic identity and the curricula in Slovak history and tradition embedded into it, these institutions serve as both (Fawco, 2023). The Association has also published several periodicals and educational materials in Slovak – *Život* – is a Slovak-language magazine published in Poland, dedicated specifically to the Slovak national minority living in the country which spread news, historical pieces and cultural content related to Slovaks in Poland. These publications have helped in building the counter-public sphere; they provide a place for identity expression outside of the dominant Polish narrative (Britannica, 2025b).

The function of cultural festivals organised by the Association and of the celebration of Slovak Days in Poland is both symbolic and functional (practical). They help to maintain group cohesion and give an opportunity for intergenerational interaction with folklore, music, and culinary traditions. More specifically, these events have incited cross-border cultural diplomacy in collaboration with Slovak organisations and institutions (Gov, 2024). For example, the promotion of heritage among youth is a notable strategy on which the Association bases itself, since the Association sees the risk of assimilation and cultural erosion. The purpose of youth groups, summer camps and student exchanges is to promote the civic participation of younger Slovaks in Poland. These activities constitute the transition from passive preservation of heritage to active mobilisation of ethnic culture, and the association acts now as a modern actor of ethnic revival. With meagre available resources, the Association's underlying activities have succeeded in attaining cultural visibility and maintaining the institutional continuity of the Slovak minority, a feat considering its demographic difficulties and wider tendencies among minorities in Europe to lose their language use.

3.4 Challenges and Transformation Post-1989

1989 was the fall of the communist regime in Poland, which led to a deep transformation of the public and legal space of the political life in Poland, offering opportunity as well

as a challenge for the Slovak Association. A transition to a democratic system and greater legal protection for minorities under the new constitution, as well as Poland's eventual accession to the European Union, have contributed to strengthening the frameworks of cultural and linguistic rights (Euractiv, 2023). However, this period also increased new vulnerabilities. Overall, the financial system of funding underwent such a change that the Association has become more and more dependent on grants and subsidies of a cultural nature, as well as on domestic and EU funds. At the same time, demographic changes were taking place in which rural depopulation and youth migration made less a base of the active participants and increased doubts about intergenerational continuity (Diggitmagazine, 2017).

The strategic response through adaptation to the situation turned out to be making partnerships with Slovak governmental and non-governmental organisations. The Association has been able to achieve this diversification and additional resource access through these transnational collaborations (Gov, 2024). Challenges remain acute. The post socialist background of market liberalisation and national retrenchment has resulted in the diminishing of attention to minority issues from the national policy agenda priorities. In addition, the Slovak language is still undergoing the pressure of assimilation and reduced transmission in mixed households. Despite this, the Association has successfully repositioned itself in the new civic environment, as it is agile and engaged in cultural sustainability (Buśko et al. 2022). More broadly, the transformation of its post-1989 institutional reinvention resonates with broader regional patterns of minority institutional reinvention in the post-authoritarian era.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis and Discussion

The symbolic and institutional guardian of cultural memory is the Slovak Association in Poland, which is engaged in the preservation of the ethnic identity. Active against pressures of linguistic and cultural assimilation and dilution, its focus on Slovak language education, cultural events, and especially media production helps in a period where national homogeneity is an important undercurrent in Central Europe (Trzeszczyńska and Demel, 2025). This added importance of the Association is owing to the fact that the contemporary European Union framework supports multiculturalism, minority rights, and cross-border cooperation. Such institutions also play an important role in bridging national boundaries to facilitate cultural connectivity, as pointed out by Kurowska-Pysz and Puksas (2020). This also mirrors the Slovak Association, they do both bilateral programmes and heritage initiatives in which the Slovak organisations are participating. Overall, this shows how it has become a modern transnational actor integrated in EU cultural governance.

The Association, however, more than anything else, faces structural limitations. Bonet and Zamorano (2021) argue that in illiberal democracies, minority institutions may be tolerated rhetorically, while reality is such that illiberal democracies subtly undermine their influence through funding constraints or policy neglect. This should be seen within

a political environment where nationalist discourses are latent and where the Slovak Association's continued existence demonstrates both resilience and fragility. In a comparative vein, the profile of this association is like other minority associations, such as the Ukrainian ones studied by Trzeszczyńska and Demel (2025), with their common problems of generational disaffection with the association, conflict about the association's discourses of national belonging, and the strategic use of state patronage. However, the Slovak Association's relatively tight geographic base of membership and institutional continuity have facilitated the stronger cultural transmission model.

Assuming a tension between the civic nationalist and ethnocultural pluralist paradigms (Slámová and Belčáková, 2020), the Association's trajectory theoretically is a result. Therefore, it falls within the boundaries of Polish constitutional nationalism, yet at the same time claims its own Slovak cultural identity—these are the conditions for Slovak autonomy Kymlicka would accept. The Association functions to collective recognition, such that minority identity can be coextensive with state sovereignty. In addition, the notion that peripheral ethnic communities like Slovaks in southern Poland can adopt spatial-cultural strategies aimed at resistance to assimilation is corroborated by the literature on cultural geography (Jaszczak et al., 2021). Therefore, the Association does not only have a preservationist role but a strategic participatory role in working with state and EU mechanisms to claim minority rights in an increasingly political context.

5. Conclusion

The story of the Slovak Association in Poland has a nice historical narrative of institutional endurance, cultural agency, and evolutionary strategy. Because the Association emerged in a socialist ideological conformity context, it has been able to transform into a modern minority institution being exercised within a democratic and supranational frame. Substantive is its contribution to cultural diversity in Poland, as well as making available for ethnic Slovaks an organisational platform for the maintenance of linguistic, educational and traditional practices across generations. The Association serves beyond cultural preservation and strengthens Poland's pluralist credentials in the sense that it aligns that identity with wider European minority protection and multicultural principles. The fact that it also accentuates cross-border cooperation in the Carpathian corridor when it comes to cultural diplomacy proves to back the point. It will impose formidable future challenges, including demographic decline, generational disengagement and changing policy priorities, which may jeopardize the Association's mission. These issues will need to be addressed with a series of adaptive strategies, deeper youth engagement, and continued collaboration with transnational bodies.

Authors' Contribution Statement

The author contributed equally to the conception and writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Based in Poland, holds a master's degree in Ethnology from the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava – Slovakia. He is dedicated to preserving Slovak culture and pursuing a PhD on the Slovak minority in Poland, while also working as an educator.

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