

The Law on the German Language in Administration

Vienna (Wien), Bratislava (Pressburg),¹ 1784

Sources quote divergent dates of its issue. The confusion stems from the fact that a sequence of documents brought about the execution of Emperor Joseph II's plan. If only one date is needed from the perspective of the impact on the Kingdom of Hungary, it is either 18 May, the final legislation, or 1 November when some of its articles began to take effect (except a section of article 5 that took effect immediately).

- 6 March 1784 **Joseph II's mandate** (*Mandat*) issued in Vienna that contained the goal of introducing German as the language of administration in all of the Habsburg lands, which effectively meant the Kingdom of Hungary and Galicia, because German was already common elsewhere.
- 26 April 1784 **Joseph II's letter** (*Handscreiben*) sent by the Imperial Court in Vienna to the Royal Chancellor, Count Francis Eszterházy of Galanta, at the Royal Chancellery for the Kingdom of Hungary in Bratislava. The document formally communicated the emperor's intent and reasoning why Latin was being removed from government business and replaced by German.
- 6 May 1784 **Joseph II's regulation**, decree (*Verordnung*), sent by Vienna to Bratislava. The document laid out the introduction of German and set the deadline for 1 November 1784.
- 11 May 1784 **Royal Chancellor's rescript** (*Rescript*), issued in Bratislava, to the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hungary reporting the emperor's intent. Eszterházy marked the pace from the start and issued the rescript after he was rebuffed energetically by Joseph II when the emperor received Eszterházy's objections to the regulation.
- 18 May 1784 **The Royal Chancellery's regulation**, decree (*Verordnung*), issued in Bratislava, with 7 articles on the use of German and with Joseph II's opening and closing paragraphs.
- 1 Nov. 1784 Joseph II's reform took effect.
- 28 Jan. 1790 Joseph II canceled this and numerous other reforms enacted during his rule.

¹ The city was then called Pressburg in German, Prešporok in Slovak, Posonium in Latin, Pozsony in Hungarian, occasionally Istropolis made up from Greek words. Martin Votruba, "Bratislava's Name." *Slovak Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh*. <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/qsonhist/bratislavaname.html>

The dates mark the formal steps taken in the introduction of German as the language of administration in the Kingdom of Hungary. Sources mostly give only one of the dates above and sometimes misquote other dates that concerned the use of German (e.g., in university education, or the emperor's opinions expressed in his letters), but were not part of this legislation.

Joseph II's law became one of the factors that triggered linguistic and ethnic strife in the kingdom, which ultimately led to its demise. While the kingdom's Diet resisted the law, ethnically Hungarian (Magyar) activists in it moved forward by demanding not a reinstatement of Latin, but by calling for its replacement with Hungarian as the language of administration. That split the Hungarians from the major groups that surrounded them in the kingdom, the Slovaks, Romanians, and Croats, who shared the ethnic Hungarians' defiance towards the law on German, but did not see any reason to replace Latin with Hungarian either. Nevertheless, the drive by Hungarian activists had been launched, continued after the cancellation of the law, and began to create a deeper rift among the kingdom's subjects when some counties started to allow administration in Hungarian, but not other languages, in addition to Latin in 1806.

His Imperial Majesty Joseph II

Royal Chancellery Edict Office for Hungary²

18 May 1784, Bratislava (Pressburg)

The use of a dead language like Latin in all public business shows clearly that the nation³ has not yet attained a degree of enlightenment, which is silent testimony that either the national language is lacking, or that no other people⁴ can read or write in that language, and that only those who have dedicated themselves to the study of Latin are able to express their views in writing, but the nation at large is governed and receives judicial decisions in a language that it does not understand; even more obvious evidence is the prohibition on the use of Latin in public business among all the enlightened peoples while it still maintains its old position in Hungary and its associated realms,⁵ as well as in the Grand Duchy of Transylvania, and in Poland.

If the Hungarian language were the prevalent local language in the Kingdom of Hungary and its associated parts, and in the Grand Duchy of Transylvania, it could indeed be used to carry

² Footnotes, and the translation of the *Verordnung* and accompanying paragraphs by Martin Votruba.

³ *Nation* in the original.

⁴ *Volk* in the original.

⁵ I.e., the Kingdom of Croatia and the Kingdom of Slavonia at that time.

out public business; it is, however, known that the German and Illyrian⁶ languages with their numerous dialects, as well as Wallachian,⁷ are also in use, inasmuch that there is no way to consider Hungarian to be the prevalent language. It would, therefore, not be possible to select another language to carry out public business than German after all, which the Imperial Government is already using in all its military and political business. The examples of the French, English, and Russians make it sufficiently convincing and easy to see how many advantages for the common good will be brought about when only one language is used in the whole monarchy and when public business is carried out in it alone, which will bind all the parts of the monarchy more closely and form a stronger bond of brotherly love among its inhabitants. And how productive it will be especially for Hungary when it ceases wasting its time learning so many languages that are common in its lands, when it abandons its use of Latin for the most part and, indeed, prepares all, through their command of the single language of the monarchy, for domestic and external business as well as for the respective offices.

Whereas His Majesty now thinks that the moment in time is here when this purpose can be effected for the glory of the nation as well as of the whole monarchy, His Majesty has enacted that

1. Beginning from 1 November of the current year, except for court proceedings, all business that will still be allowed in Latin throughout the year shall be carried out in no other but the German language at the Royal Hungarian-Transylvanian Chancellery, and all dispatches to the provincial imperial offices and to this Chancellery shall be executed in the same language. Those, however, that are issued directly to the counties are still to be prepared in the Latin language until 1 November 1785. This Royal Chancellery, too, shall, therefore, receive no other dispatches except those prepared in the German language beginning from 1 November 1784.
2. Likewise, from 1 November 1784, all the provincial imperial offices in the Kingdom of Hungary and its associated parts, and in the Grand Duchy of Transylvania will handle all their pertinent business and among each other in the German language, and all the reports and submissions to the imperial offices⁸ shall be drafted in the same language; but dispatches to the subordinate offices can still be prepared in Latin for the duration of one year, and they can handle reports in the Latin language from the latter offices and submit them to His Majesty during that time.
3. From 1 November 1785, all counties, royal free towns, as well as special regions and localities shall carry out all their business in the German language, and all their submitted reports and other related correspondence shall also be drafted in the same; as regards the

⁶ I.e., Slavic in this context.

⁷ I.e., Romanian.

⁸ *Hofstellen*, aulic departments.

- dispatches and other edicts⁹ in the Latin language, which the Hungarian and Transylvanian Royal Chancellery is allowed to send to the Imperial Government until 1 November 1785, the Chancellery is thereafter ordered to draft them in columns with Latin on one side and German on the other for the next two years, and eventually, after the expiration of this timeframe, they shall be drafted in nothing else but German, which the provincial imperial offices, too, shall respect in their dispatches to the various jurisdictions of the kingdom.
4. After the passage of three years, all the imperial courts of justice and local courts shall handle all their respective cases in German at their locations, and the lawyers themselves shall prepare all their cases in this language and present them to the courts. Nevertheless, His Majesty is not unwilling to extend this deadline according to identified circumstances, which the imperial offices will be able to advance in their time. The statutes will remain in Latin, because the lawyers and judges must, regardless, know this language, which is part of academic scholarship.
 5. After this, no one shall be allowed to acquire a position, be it in the imperial offices, counties, or the Church, if he does not have a command of the German language; which applies from today's date in the imperial offices, within a year at the counties, but after three years, unconditionally, in the lower Church as well as secular offices. From 1 November 1785, therefore, each person at the counties, also the appointees at all types of magistratical business, who does not understand the German language, shall be incompetent.
 6. His Majesty wants to introduce the use of the German language to the business of the Diets themselves. No Deputy to the Diet that does not know German shall, therefore, be sent there after three years.
 7. Further, from 1 November 1784, no youth shall be allowed in a Latin school who is not able to prove that he can read and write German.

This is His Majesty's firm conclusion drawn, after mature deliberation and subsequent complete conviction, for the good and honor of the Hungarian nation. His Majesty does not forward this counsel because the imperial offices might be determined to destroy the national language, nor because the various nations living in the Kingdom of Hungary and its associated parts, and in the Grand Duchy of Transylvania, should leave the use of their mother tongues behind and learn another one, nor yet because His Majesty might wish to serve His own convenience through it: on the contrary, the goal of this highest regulation¹⁰ is for those who engage in the execution of public business to understand both German and Latin and be able to use it in the management of public matters. His Majesty will, therefore, not be deterred from implementing this supreme regulation¹¹ by any counterproposals.

⁹ *Patente*

¹⁰ *höchste Verordnung*

¹¹ *allerhöchste Verordnung*