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4:06 pm
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Mind Your Language, Says Hungary's Government

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By MARGIT FEHER CONNECT

BUDAPEST—Hungary's feisty leader, heading toward a reelection in April, since 2010 has given his nation a new constitution, a revamped central bank, new regulators and even a new way to buy tobacco. His latest idea: a new institute for the Hungarian language.

The Hungarian Language-Strategy Institute will start to operate April 1 and is supposed encourage correct use of the language.

Hungarian belongs to the Uralic language family, making Finnish and Estonian the only relatives in Europe. It's spoken by about 10 million people in Hungary and a further three to five million living abroad, mostly in territories held by Hungary before World War I. In 1920, the Treaty of Trianon, still often lamented in Hungary, awarded more than two thirds of "Greater Hungary" to neighboring countries, leaving a third of native Hungarian speakers outside the country's present borders.

The establishment of a new language body is part of the Fidesz-party government's much-criticized drive to set up new institutes. The new bodies have followed Fidesz's preferred understanding of a given subject and exist sometimes side-by-side or on top of other organizations already engaged in the same realm.

Since coming into power in 2010, the government has founded the Hungarian Academy of Arts, the Veritas—or Truth—History Research Institute to study Hungarian history of the 150 years leading up to the 1989 fall of Communism, the RTKI—an institute to study the history of the 1989 regime change, the Institute of National Heritage to cultivate historically significant sights and memorials, and the Nation-Strategy Research Institute, which is to help the survival and enrichment of "the historical Hungarian nation" at home and beyond Hungary's current borders.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a lawyer by training, is to oversee the new body through the head of his office. Mr. Orbán looks slated to win a second consecutive term at the helm of the country at April's parliamentary elections.

Nurturing the Hungarian language and cultivating sciences were already behind



The Hungarian Academy of Sciences — MTA

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19th-century statesman István Széchenyi's initiative in 1825 to found the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, or MTA, said József Pálinkás, the MTA's head. The new body will be not more than an administrative arm of the government, he said.

"To me, the government decree means that the 20-strong institute will operate not as a home for scientific research but as a central bureau of the Prime Minister's Office which coordinates the preparation of materials to be written at the government's order for its decisions on language policy and language cultivation," he said in a written response to questions.

The government has declined to comment beyond what it said in the decree, according to which the institute is to establish and monitor a medium-term strategy for the Hungarian language, research the language's structure, characteristics, and functioning, and implement findings in public education.

Mr. Pálinkás said public duties of the MTA's Research Institute for Linguistics include helping develop the Hungarian language, support research into its history, lexis, grammar and use in various sciences. The MTA is mostly financed from state funds.

"It's hard to draw a parallel between an institute that functions as a state office and an institute that conducts scientific research," Mr. Pálinkás said.

Géza Balázs, head of the Hungarian Linguistics department at Eötvös Lóránd University, or ELTE, welcomed the government's decision.

The Hungarian language needs to be protected and improved since it is in regression, in contrast to other languages spreading globally, Mr. Balázs said in his research paper 'Outline of a Possible Language Strategy' at end-2011.

Currently, "the society-wide degradation of culture is making an impact on language as well. Vocabulary has been narrowing, language use is becoming simplistic, and stylistic differences are disappearing. Low-quality language is becoming the norm," Mr. Balázs said.

Mr. Balázs is widely tipped to be behind the government's move and that he may take a position at the new body. He said he hasn't received a request to join the institute, although "that may change."

But most linguists received news of the government decree with raised eyebrows and disapproval, said Ádám Nádasdy, a professor of linguistics at ELTE in Budapest.

“The government may decide what it is willing to dish money out for, but that doesn’t make it linguistics. We are not the Soviet Union of the 1930s, where Stalin decided what makes science and what not. This is not Francoist Spain,” said Mr. Nádasdy, who has also translated several plays of Shakespeare into Hungarian and is working on a new translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy.

“There’s no need for an institute in the outlined form,” he added.

Stalin had a peculiar interest in linguistics and wrote a controversial work about “Marxism and Problems in Linguistics” in 1950. In Francoist Spain, hegemony of the Spanish language was forcefully promoted and the arts had to align with the official line.

“It would be a very, very grave problem if politics presided over scientific research. That shouldn’t happen,” Mr. Nádasdy added.

“Maybe in the future all state grant applications will need to be submitted with a national-tricolored appendix, or they would need to be glazed over with a patriotic frosting,” Mr. Nádasdy added.

Write to Margit Fehér at margit.feher@wsj.com

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5:52 pm March 22, 2014

Daniel wrote:

It's not about language. It's about politics as the article concludes. (I would write "pure politics" if it weren't contradiction in terms most of the time and especially in this instance.)

4:57 am March 22, 2014

Pisti wrote:

It is our duty to protect and develop our language. However, this issue belongs in the cultural arena, not in the political arena. Orban is a good leader, but he is wrong on this issue.

9:43 pm March 21, 2014

David K. wrote:

This purity of language is BS. The obsession is due to a rise in nationalism not seen since the rise of Adolf Hitler who did the same thing with the german language. Be careful Hungarians, don't let history repeat itself with this crazed nationalism

5:55 pm March 21, 2014

Anonymous wrote:

Look, the Jobbik'tards have not (yet) polluted this message stream. Enjoy while it lasts 😊

3:53 pm March 21, 2014

Anonymous wrote:

I went to school in Transylvania, and our teachers always emphasized correct speech. Then I met people from Hungary and I was shocked by their linguistic slovenliness.

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