

3. THE GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF HUNGARIAN-MEDIUM PUBLIC EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA



Historical background

The existence and extent of the Hungarian-medium public education system operating in Slovakia can only be understood in its historical context. The phenomenon is not the result of minority policy solutions that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, nor of migration processes, but rather the continuation of an institutional legacy spanning more than a century, which was placed in a minority position by geopolitical changes and the redrawing of state borders.

Prior to the First World War, the territory of present-day Slovakia formed part of the Kingdom of Hungary, where public education was organized within state and ecclesiastical structures. The Hungarian

language, particularly in parts of primary and secondary education, served as a dominant language of instruction, especially in regions with a significant proportion of Hungarian native speakers. Although education in this period did not yet constitute mass public education in the modern sense, by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century institutional frameworks had emerged in which Hungarian-medium education operated in a legally and organizationally embedded form. As a result of the peace treaties concluding the First World War, these territories (inhabited by more than one million Hungarians) were transferred to Czechoslovakia, while the overwhelming majority of the local Hungarian

population remained in place and acquired the status of a national minority.

Throughout the twentieth century, the institutional system of Hungarian-medium education continued to function under various political regimes and minority policy concepts. Although the network of institutions was periodically subject to significant restrictions and reorganizations,⁸ the fundamental structures of Hungarian-medium education survived and were subsequently reorganized after the Second World War and during the period of state socialism within new legal and administrative frameworks. Contemporary Hungarian public education in Slovakia is therefore

not a parallel system created retrospectively, but the present-day form of a historically inherited and continuously evolving institutional network.

Legal and regulatory framework

Article 34 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic stipulates that, for citizens belonging to national minorities or ethnic groups, “under conditions laid down by law, alongside the right to acquire the state language, the right to education in their mother tongue is guaranteed.” The Slovak Constitution further guarantees national minorities the “right to comprehensive development,” in particular the right, together with other members of the minority, to develop their own culture, and to disseminate and receive information in their mother tongue.

While the Constitution does not define the concept of a national minority, Act No. 184/1999 Coll. on the Use of Languages of National Minorities defines the notion of a minority language and enumerates the minority languages recognized in Slovakia. Pursuant to Section 2 of the Act, a “minority language” is “a codified or standardized language traditionally used in the territory of

the Slovak Republic, used by citizens belonging to a national minority, and differing from the state language.” Under the Act, Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, Hungarian, German, Polish, Romani, Rusyn and Ukrainian qualify as minority languages.

The guarantee of educational rights for national minorities also derives from international obligations. In 2001, the Slovak Republic acceded to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, thereby committing itself to protect and develop historical regional minority languages through the instruments of the treaty. With regard to Hungarian, Slovakia undertook that regional education may be provided entirely in the given language.⁹ Slovakia had signed the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities earlier, on February 1, 1995, and then ratified it on September 15, 1995. Following the required number of ratifications, the Convention entered into force on February 1, 1998. Through this, Slovakia assumed obligations to respect the fundamental principles of minority protection, promote equality for national minorities in all areas of social life, as well as to ensure the protection and development of their culture and identity. Minority education constitutes an inseparable part of the education and training system and is therefore governed by the general education legislation currently in force. The detailed provisions are primarily set out in the following legal acts:

- Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Upbringing and Education (the School Act) and on the amendment and supplementation of certain acts;
- Act No. 596/2003 Coll. on State Administration in Education and School Self-Government and on the amendment and supplementation of certain acts;
- Act No. 597/2003 Coll. on the financing of primary schools, secondary schools and school facilities;
- Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on pedagogical and professional employees and on the amendment and supplementation of certain acts.

In addition, from the perspective of Hungarian-medium education, a compilation of regulations published in 2024 by the Department of Minority and Inclusive Education of the Slovak Ministry of Education is of particular relevance.¹⁰

The concept of minority education was incorporated into the School Act only after an amendment adopted in 2022. According to the Act’s basic definition, minority education “includes schools teaching in the language of a national minority, classes teaching in the language of a national minority, schools teaching the language of a national minority, classes teaching the language of a national minority, and minority educational institutions.”¹¹ The institutions

constituting the Hungarian education system in Slovakia are minority educational institutions; according to the explanatory provisions of the Act, these are institutions in which “the educational process and professional activities are carried out in the language of the national minority.”

The School Act allows that, in primary and secondary schools where the language of instruction is not the state language, Slovak language and Slovak literature may be taught as a foreign language (Section 12). The language in which subjects are taught is identical to the language in which examinations and quality-assessment measurements are conducted. Under the Act, pedagogical and other documentation in minority schools may be maintained bilingually, in the state language and in the minority language. With respect to textbooks, the School Act permits free selection of publications, provided that they comply with the principles and goals of education; oversight in this regard falls under the competence of the Ministry of Education. From the perspective of minority education, this has meant that the market for teaching materials has opened not only to experts and authors from minority communities, but also to foreign publications – provided that these meet statutory criteria.

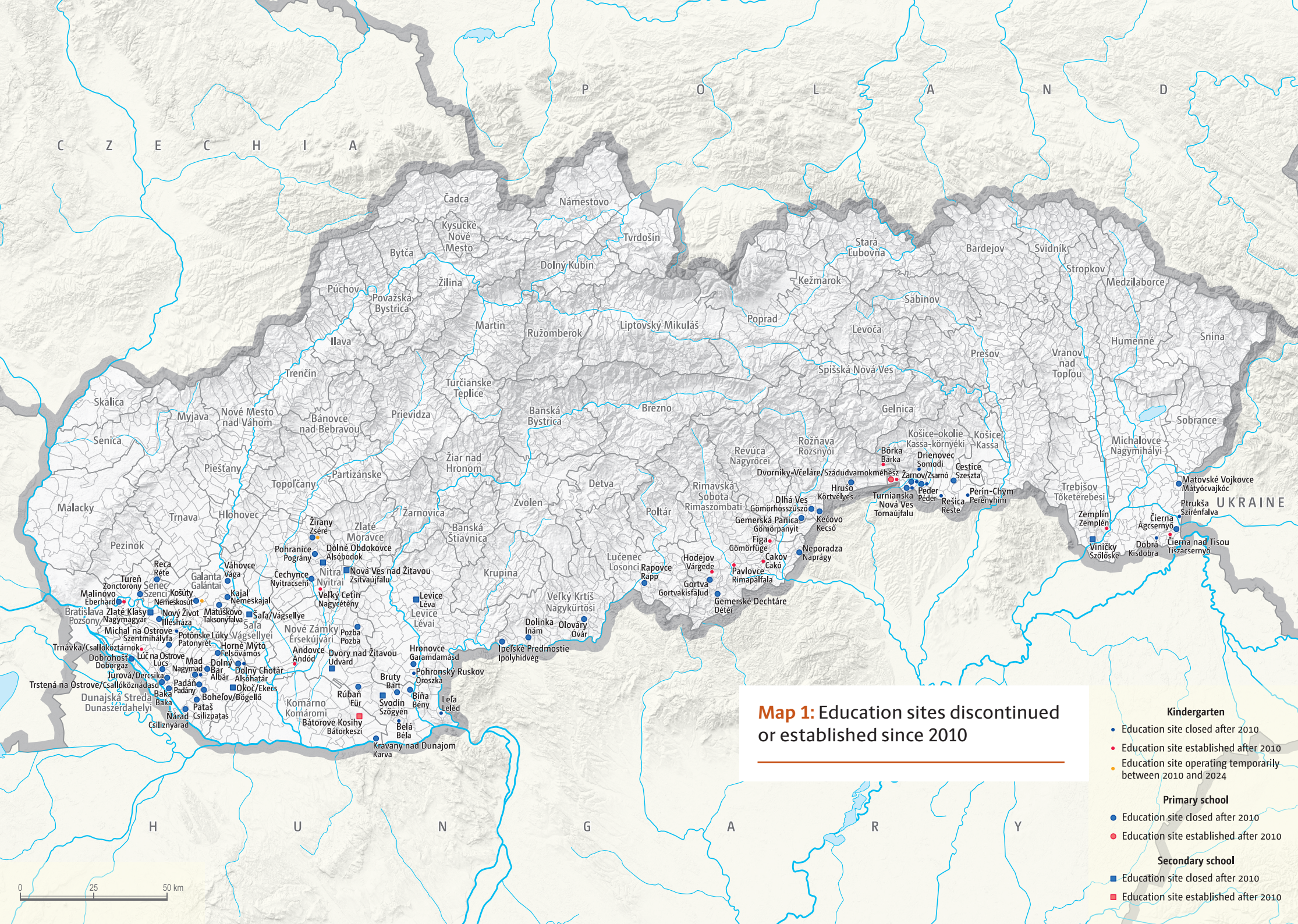
Compulsory schooling lasts for ten years, extending until the end of the school year in which the student reaches the age of 16. According to the most recent amendment to the School Act, the Slovak education system comprises eleven types of institutions: kindergarten, primary school, grammar school, vocational secondary school, industrial secondary school, sports school, secondary school of applied arts, conservatory, schools for children and students with special educational needs, basic art school and language school.¹²

Under the current regulation, one year of compulsory kindergarten attendance is required before a child may be enrolled in school. In practice, as a general rule, this means that children must enter kindergarten no later than at the age of five. As part of the reform of public education, amendments adopted through Act No. 323/2025¹³ provide that, from September 2027 onward, kindergarten education will be compulsory for all four-year-old children in Slovakia, and from 2028 onward for all three-year-old children as well. The restructuring of public education is therefore actively underway, and at the time of finalizing the manuscript it is not yet possible to determine precisely what effects individual governmental measures will have on the Hungarian-medium education system in Slovakia.

The evolution of the institutional structure

Over the examined one-and-a-half-decade period, the Hungarian kindergarten network in Slovakia shows signs of modest strengthening. In the 2010/2011 school year, 348 kindergartens provided education in Hungarian: 270 were independent Hungarian institutions, while 78 were Slovak–Hungarian jointly administered institutions operating Hungarian-medium kindergarten groups. By the 2024/2025 school year, the Hungarian institutional network comprised 357 kindergartens, of which 281 were independent Hungarian institutions and 76 Slovak–Hungarian jointly administered institutions. A substantial share of kindergartens is maintained by municipalities (332 kindergartens in 2024), 24 by churches, and one by a private maintainer. Although the number of institutions increased slightly, the number of settlements where Hungarian-medium kindergarten is available declined marginally (Map 1).

The Public Education Act distinguishes between fully organized primary schools (with Grades 1–9) and not fully organized primary schools (with Grades 1–4).



Map 1: Education sites discontinued or established since 2010

- Kindergarten**
 - Education site closed after 2010
 - Education site established after 2010
 - Education site operating temporarily between 2010 and 2024
- Primary school**
 - Education site closed after 2010
 - Education site established after 2010
- Secondary school**
 - Education site closed after 2010
 - Education site established after 2010

In September 2023, the reform of the national educational program was launched on an experimental basis; by September 2025, approximately one thousand primary schools had joined in the country. From the 2026/2027 school year onward, all Slovak primary schools will be required, in a phased (grade-by-grade) manner, to shift to the so-called “cycle-based” system. Cycle 1 comprises Grades 1–3, Cycle 2 covers Grades 4–5, and Cycle 3 consists of Grades 6–9. In the case of fully organized primary schools, the School Act specifies minimum class sizes for lower and upper levels; however, these provisions do not apply to schools of national minorities.

The main source of financing for maintaining and operating public education is the state budget. Under the education financing act that entered into force in 2004, municipalities, churches, and private and legal persons maintaining primary and secondary schools are eligible for state support, the amount of which depends on the institution’s student enrollment.

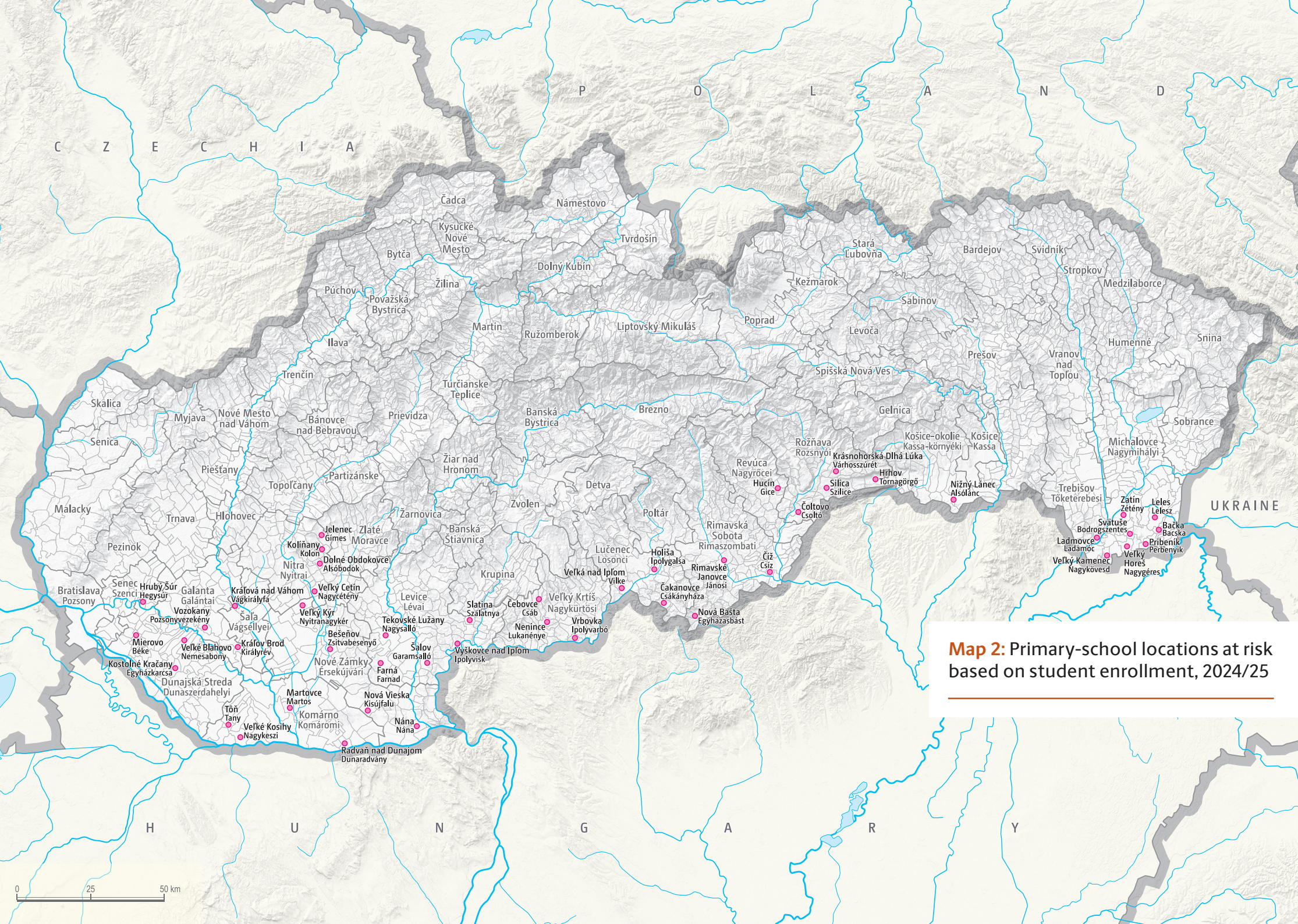
The state per-capita allocation (normative funding) changes annually and is determined in the central budget. When the financing system was designed, an average school size of 250 students served as the reference point. Institutions with at least 250 students receive the base normative amount; for schools with

fewer students, an equalization coefficient was introduced. From an enrollment of 249 students, the size coefficient increases per student down to 150 students, where it reaches 1.495. For schools with fewer than 150 students, the coefficient no longer increases; i.e. for these institutions the subsidy is uniformly approximately one-and-a-half times the per-capita base amount. For minority schools, legislation takes into account the increased compulsory teaching load; consequently, the base normative funding for Hungarian-medium schools is 13% higher than that for Slovak-medium schools.

Given the settlement structure of Hungarians in Slovakia, the Hungarian school network includes a large number of schools with low enrollment. In these cases, however, even the one-and-a-half size coefficient is often insufficient to ensure sustainable operation, and many municipal governments must therefore cover the resources necessary for institutional survival from their own budgets. The situation of these institutions may be further complicated by the planned reform of school financing, under which the Ministry of Education would reduce the highest size coefficient to 1.35 from the 2026/2027 school year onwards (and would also decrease each coefficient in the 150–249 student range), and would then phase it out entirely by 2031.

In the 2010/2011 school year, there were 271 primary schools providing Hungarian-medium education in Slovakia; of these, 138 were fully organized (Grades 1–9) and 133 were lower-level schools only. Fifteen school years later, this network had contracted to 225 institutions: in the 2024/2025 school year it consisted of 143 fully organized and 82 not fully organized institutions. Therefore, the number of Hungarian schools declined substantially (by 17%) over the examined period, with a total of 46 institutions closing permanently. This transformation, however, occurred without an overarching concept or coordination. If we examine the figures from the most recent school year in greater detail, it becomes clear that the process has not yet come to an end, and that many schools are severely endangered due to low enrollment (Map 2).

In the 2024/2025 school year, the average enrollment of Hungarian schools was 131 students. In 86 institutions, total enrollment did not exceed 50 students, and in a further 32 it reached 100. Between 100 and 250 students attended 77 schools. Only 30 schools thus have enrollments above 250 students. These figures also imply that the reduction and planned elimination of normative support affects 85% of Hungarian schools. Not fully organized institutions constitute 36.5% of the Hungarian school network in Slovakia, while only 8% of all students studying in Hungarian



Map 2: Primary-school locations at risk based on student enrollment, 2024/25

attend these schools; average enrollment in this segment is only 29 students.

Similarly to kindergartens, the overwhelming majority of primary schools are also maintained by local governments: in 2024, 190 Hungarian and 22 Slovak–Hungarian jointly administered institutions

were maintained by municipalities, while a further 13 schools operated under church maintenance. The Hungarian-medium secondary school network in Slovakia (comprising grammar schools, vocational secondary schools, and vocational schools) consisted of 68 institutions in the 2010/2011 school year. Of the 26 grammar schools operating at the time, 20

remained by the 2024/2025 school year. The number of vocational secondary schools and vocational schools declined from 42 at the beginning of the decade to 37. A significant share of secondary institutions is maintained by municipalities, while a smaller proportion operate under private or church maintenance.



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an Atlas of Student Enrollment, Demography and Social Trends

Horizontum Civil Association; Geographical Institute HUN-REN CSFK; VEKTOR Social Research Association

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