

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION AND REGIONAL IDENTITY IN SLOVAKIA

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**Abstract:** One of a multiple person's identities is their sense of belonging to the region which they come from, i.e., a regional identity. In this paper, we aim to analyze the development of Slovakia's administrative division and its impact on the regional identity of Slovak population. The most important factor in the formation of a regional identity was how long a region had existed. The second factor appears to be the size of the territory, as the so-called "major regions" are still used in a regional identity, even thirty years after their dissolution. The third factor is linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, which is more dominant mainly in the peripheral areas (the Záhoráci, the Gorali, and the dialects of Eastern Slovakia).

**Keywords:** region, regional identity, administrative division

### Introduction

Every person identifies themselves on various levels. They may identify themselves professionally, socially, culturally, ethnically, and religiously. One aspect of a person's identity is their affiliation with the region from which they come—that is, their regional identity. In this paper, we aim to analyze the evolution of Slovakia's administrative divisions and their impact on the regional identity of Slovakia's population. We will examine the duration of individual administrative divisions as well as the geographical size of each region. The basic assumption is that regions that were larger and existed for longer periods left a greater imprint on the regional identity of the population.

### 1. The Historical Development of Regions in Slovakia

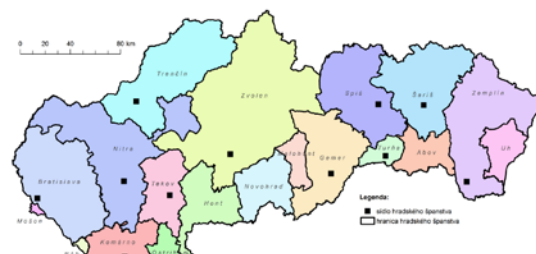
Throughout the development of the administrative division in Slovakia, several territorial units have come and gone. Chronologically, these were counties – "komitáty", "stolice", "župy", districts and regions. In Slovak historiography, there is a dual terminology regarding the nomenclature of these territorial units. The first group of historians refers to "župy" throughout their entire development from the Middle Ages to 1945. The second group of historians distinguishes between three terms based on the nature of these territorial units: up to the 13th/14th century, we refer to royal counties "kráľovské komitáty"; from the 13th/14th century to 1849, we refer to counties "stolice"; and for the periods 1849–1928 and 1940–1945, we refer to counties "župy". In this article, we will use the terminology from the second group, as we believe it more accurately describes reality.

#### 1.1 Counties – "komitáty" (10th–13th/14th centuries)

Counties likely began to emerge at the end of the 10th century during the reign of Gejza (997–1000) and during the reign of Stephen I (1000–1038). They built upon the castle system established in Great Moravia and in the Transdanubia region. In Slovakia, around the year 1000, the following counties likely already existed: Bratislava, Moson, Ráb, Komárno, Esztergom, Nitra, Novohrad (including the later Hont), and Turňa. Other counties were established roughly as follows: at the beginning of the 11th century: Tekov County, Zemplín County, the county of "comitatus Novi Castri" (later Abov, Šariš, and Heveš); in the 11th century: Hont County (separated from Novohrad County) and Uzh County; at the end of the 11th century: Trenčín County, Gemer County (established no later than the beginning of the 12th century); in the 12th century: Zvolen County (including Liptov, Orava, and Turiec); in the second half of the 12th century: Spiš County; in the first half of the 13th century: Šariš County (separated from Novi Castri County); in the second half of the 13th century: Abov County (a new name for the Novi Castri county). In addition, there were numerous small so-called border counties whose role was to protect the borders (in Slovakia, for example, Hlohovec). The counties were royal property and were divided into castle districts. At the head of

each county stood a county governor (comes) appointed by the king. The county governor performed administrative, judicial, military, and economic functions. The counties ceased to exist with the establishment of the counties "stolice" (Žudel, 1984).

Map 1: Counties in Slovakia in the 13th century.



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_01.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_01.png)

#### 1.2 Counties – "stolice" (13th–14th centuries – 1848)

In the 13th century, royal power began to decline. Particularly during the reign of Andrew II (1205–1235), royal estates steadily diminished as a result of an ill-advised policy of royal grants to secular and ecclesiastical feudal lords. This caused concern among social classes dependent on the castle system, particularly among the royal servants. The royal servants feared that, due to the growing power of the magnates, they would fall under their control, and they compelled King Andrew II to issue the Golden Bull, which prohibited the donation of entire counties. But even the new monarch, Béla IV (1235–1270), was unable to halt the process of decay; he tried in vain to revise his father's policy of land grants. Consequently, the royal vassals began efforts to transform the royal counties into a new institution that would protect them from the magnates. In the 1230s, they gained judicial autonomy, which marked the first step toward the formation of the gentry councils. A royal decree of 1267 strengthened the position of the gentry and allowed nobles to participate in the annual judicial assembly in Stoličný Beľhrad (Žudel, 1984). Royal decrees from 1290 and 1298 enshrined in law the nobility's right to elect four officials, who became representatives of self-government in the counties – "komitáty", thereby transforming them into counties – "stolice" (Žudel, 1990).

The transformation of counties – "komitáty" into counties – "stolice" proceeded unevenly in Slovakia. By the end of the 13th century, the counties "stolice" of Abov, Bratislava, Gemer, Hont, Komárno, Novohrad, Esztergom, and Zemplín had been established. In the early 14th century, Spiš and Turňa counties "stolice" were established, followed by Uh; and in the first half of the 14th century, Nitra, Šariš, Tekov, Trenčín, Liptov (separating from Zvolen County), Turiec (separating from Zvolen County), and Zvolen. Second half of the 14th century: Orava (became independent from Zvolen County). The county "stolice" boundaries were finalized in the 15th century. From the 14th century until 1802 (with the exception of 1785–1790), the following 21 counties – "stolice" existed in Slovakia: Abov, Bratislava, Gemer, Hont, Komárno, Liptov, Mozson, Nitra, Novohrad, Orava, Esztergom, Ráb, Spiš, Šariš, Tekov, Trenčín, Turiec, Turňa, Uzh, Zemplín, and Zvolen. In 1802, Malohont was definitively separated (previously, from 1786 to 1790, during the Josephine reforms of Emperor Joseph II) from the Hont County "stolica" (from which it was, however, separated by the territory of the Novohrad County) and merged with the Gemer County to form the Gemer-Malohont County "stolica". The individual counties were divided into so-called district offices (usually four). The highest self-governing bodies of the counties – "stolice" were the county assemblies. (Bačík, 2022).

In addition to the counties – “stolice”, certain towns and provinces in Hungary also enjoyed special status. In Slovakia during the modern era, these included, in particular: in Spiš—The Province of XXIV Spiš Towns, The Province of XIII Spiš Towns, and The Province of XVI Spiš Towns. Free royal towns and mining towns were not subject to the administration of the counties “stolice” (Bačík, 2022).

Map 2: Counties – “stolice” in Slovakia from the 14th Century to 1848.



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_02.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_02.png)

### 1.3 The Josephine Reforms (1785–1790)

In 1785, a territorial reorganization was carried out in the Habsburg Monarchy by decree of Emperor Joseph II with the aim of streamlining state administration, reforming noble self-government, and establishing an absolutist and centralist form of government. Hungary, Croatia, and Slavonia were divided into 10 districts “dištrikty”, each comprising 4–5 counties “stolice”. The districts – “dištrikty” were headed by commissioners appointed by the monarch, and the counties “stolice” under their jurisdiction were administered by deputy governors appointed by the monarch. Three districts – “dištrikty” were established in the territory of present-day Slovakia: Nitra (comprising the former counties of Pressburg, Nitra, Trenčín, and Tekov), the Banská Bystrica District (comprising the former Turčiansko-Zvolen, Hont, Gemer, and Liptov-Orava counties), and the Košice District (comprising the former Spiš, Šariš, Abov-Turňa, and Zemplín counties). The reform met with resistance, and Joseph II revoked it shortly before his death. The districts were abolished on May 1, 1790, and during the course of 1790, the territorial administrative division reverted to its pre-1785 state (Encyclopaedia Belliana, 2013).

Map 3: Districts – “dištrikty” in Slovakia - The Josephine Reform, 1785–1790.



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_03.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_03.png)

### 1.4 Bach's Absolutism, 1849–1860

After the revolution had been suppressed in the second half of 1849, a military dictatorship—known as Bach's absolutism—was established throughout Hungary. The counties “stolice” were dissolved and they were replaced by state administrative units—counties “župy”. In 1850, after the situation had stabilized, the military dictatorship was replaced by a provisional

civil administration known as the Geringer Provisional Government, which was succeeded by a permanent government in 1853. Hungary was divided into five civil districts “dištrikty”, which, however, did not correspond to the Josephine districts. Within Slovakia, with the exception of small areas around Bratislava, two districts “dištrikty” were established, with their seats in Bratislava and Košice. At the county “župa” level, the most significant change was the establishment of the Upper Nitra and Lower Nitra counties “župy”; similarly to the Josephine Reform, smaller counties “župy” were merged, though to a lesser extent. This administrative division was abolished in 1860 when the monarch renounced absolutism and the pre-revolutionary borders were restored (Bačík, 2022).

Map 4: Districts “dištrikty”, 1850–1860, at the national level: Hungary



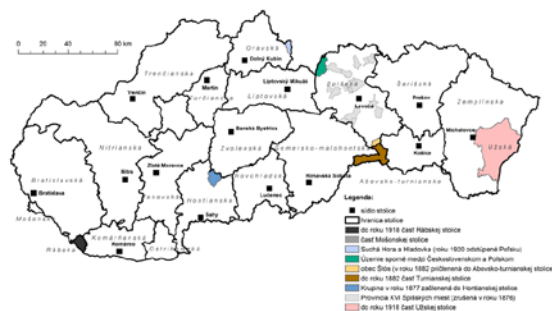
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### 1.5 The County “župa” System (1867–1922)

The period between 1860 and 1863 was a time of political uncertainty. During this period, an attempt was made to establish self-governing counties “župy”, but this could not be achieved within such a short time period. The establishment of self-governing counties “župy” did not occur until after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, when a constitutional monarchy was established. A total of 63 counties “župy” were created throughout the territory of Hungary. With a few exceptions, no significant changes occurred within Slovakia. The Turnianska County “župa” was temporarily abolished, and its definitive dissolution took place in 1882. At this stage, the boundaries of the districts were also already recorded (Žudel, J., 1993). Minor changes to county “župa” boundaries occurred between 1882 and 1888. During this period, the Province of XVI Spiš Towns was also dissolved. The towns were not spared further significant changes. In 1870, a reform of municipal administration was carried out (Municipal Law No. 42/1870), under which the rights of free royal towns were abolished and 24 municipal towns were established; like the free royal towns, these did not fall under the jurisdiction of the counties “žup”. This autonomy was abolished, with the exception of four cities, by Act No. 20/1876. Only Bratislava, Košice, Komárno, and Banská Štiavnica remained as municipal cities. In 1886, the Municipal Act was amended (No. 21/1886), as was the Municipalities Act. Under this legislation, municipalities were divided into towns with an established municipal council, large municipalities, and small municipalities (Malý, K., Sivák, F., 1992). Toward the end of the 19th century, changes also occurred in the organization of civil registries, specifically with the introduction of civil state registries. After the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in October 1918, a very important task was the demarcation of state borders. The most problematic area was the southern border with Hungary, which was established by the Treaty of Trianon on June 4, 1920. Slovakia continued to be divided into counties “župy” and four municipal cities, although the borders of the border counties “žup” were altered. The southern borders divided the counties of Rábska, Komárňanská, Ostrihomská, Hontianska, Novohradská, Gemersko-malohontská, Abovsko-turnianska, and Zemplínska. Smaller parts of the Ráb and Esztergom counties were annexed to the Komárno County, and a part of the Uzh County was annexed to the Zemplín County “župa”, thereby reducing the

number of counties “žúp” by two. The municipal cities during this period were Bratislava, Košice, Komárno, and Banská Štiavnica with Banská Bela. The counties “župy” were further subdivided into 95 district administrative units and 30 towns with established municipal councils, which were: Banská Bystrica, Bardejov, Brezno, Gelnica, Jelšava, Svätý Jur, Kežmarok, Kremnica, Levice, Levoča, Lučenec, Modra, Nitra, Nové Zámky, Pezinok, Poprad, Prešov, Rimavská Sobota, Rožňava, Sabinov, Skalica, Spišská Belá, Spišská Nová Ves, Spišské Podhradie, Spišské Vlachy, Trenčín, Trnava, Zvolen, Ružomberok, and Žilina. In 1920, the border with Poland was adjusted, resulting in the cession of parts of Upper Orava and Northern Spiš (Bačík, 2022).

Map 5: 1867–1922, national level: Austria-Hungary



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_05.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_05.png)

### 1.6 Czechoslovakia – Great Counties “veľžupy”(1923–1928)

The new county system took effect on January 1, 1923. Slovakia was thereby divided into six counties “župy”, which were called great counties “veľžupy”. This marked a significant turning point in the history of Slovakia’s territorial administration, namely the abandonment of the traditional natural regions that had functioned, with some limitations, for approximately 900 years. This was very important, as there was no return to the traditional regions even in subsequent periods.

Map 6: Great Counties (1923–1928)



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_06.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_06.png)

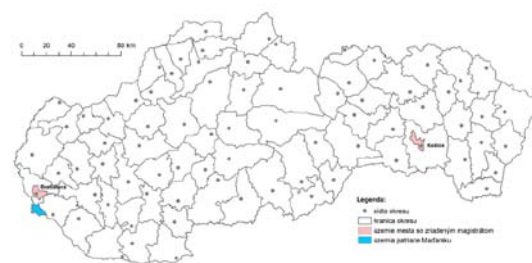
The formation of the great counties was most influenced by the old counties “župy” with distinct natural boundaries, and the influence of the former office district was also significant (especially in defining the boundaries of the Bratislava and Nitra great counties). In addition to the traditional regional centers of Bratislava, Nitra, and Košice, Zvolen was given priority over Banská Bystrica—which had been the center of Zvolen County “župa” since the 18th century—in the Zvolen Great County; Martin was given priority over Trenčín in the Považie Great County; and Liptovský Mikuláš became the center of the Podtatranská Great County. The Great Counties were divided into 79 districts pursuant to Decree No. 290/1922, which only partially corresponded to the former office districts; these became the basis for the districts that existed, with minor changes, until 1960. At the same time, the special status of towns with a magistrate and the status of municipal towns were abolished during this period. Only two cities, Bratislava and

Košice, were granted the status of cities with a regulated magistrate. Given that this county “župa” system was established only within the territory of Slovakia, it was a provisional arrangement (Bačík, 2022).

### 1.7 The Provincial Administration “krajinské zriadenie” in Czechoslovakia from 1928 to 1938

On July 1, 1928, the provincial administrative system was established. This significantly simplified and unified the complex political administration in Czechoslovakia. The counties “župy” were abolished, but the districts remained unchanged, with a few exceptions. There were 79 districts in Slovakia. During this period, the districts of Liptovský Hrádok and Žiar nad Hronom were abolished. The head of province was based in Bratislava and administered the entire territory of Slovakia. On June 27, 1936, a branch office was established in Košice to serve the districts of eastern Slovakia. During these 10 years, the district boundaries remained relatively stable, with only a few exceptions. The status of Bratislava and Košice did not change; they were the only cities in the country of Slovakia with an established municipal government (Bačík, 2022).

Map 7: The Provincial Administration and Districts, 1928–1938



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_07.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_07.png)

### 1.8 The Period of the Slovak State (1940–1945)

As a result of the Vienna Arbitration on November 2, 1938, Slovakia lost its southern districts, and on March 14, 1939, the Slovak State was proclaimed, marking the first time in history that Slovakia became an independent state. From January 1, 1940, the system of great counties “veľžup” was reinstated, with revised boundaries: Bratislava (regional capital: Bratislava), Trenčín (regional capital: Trenčín), Nitra (regional capital: Nitra), Pohronie (regional capital: Banská Bystrica), Tatra (regional capital: Ružomberok), Šariš-Zemplín (regional capital: Prešov). New districts were established: Dobšiná, Hnúšťa, and Lovinobaňa; as a result of the Vienna Arbitration, the number of districts was reduced from 77 to 60 compared to the previous regional system (Bačík, 2022).

Map 8: Great Counties in Slovakia, 1940–1945



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_08.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_08.png)



### 1.9 The Establishment of Regions “krajov” from 1949 to 1960

After the restoration of Czechoslovakia in 1945, the districts were reinstated as they had been in 1938. The territorial administrative organization during this period was two-tiered, with the first tier consisting of cities and municipalities and the second tier consisting of districts. After the communist regime came to power in 1948, a centralized three-tier system of national committees was introduced, with no form of self-government in place until 1990. On February 1, 1949, regional administrative units were reestablished under a new name—regions. Six regions and 92 districts were established in Slovakia. The number thus increased from 77 to 92. The most significant changes were recorded in the Banská Bystrica Region “kraj”. Another interesting fact was the abolition of the category of statutory cities. For the first time in history, Žilina was elevated to the status of a regional “krajské” center. Another important fact is that all regional capitals were also urban districts (Slavík, V., 1997).

Map 9: Regions “kraje” and Districts from 1949 to 1960



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_09.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_09.png)

### 1.10 Major Regions “kraje”, 1960–1990

The emergence of this phase is exceptional in nature, as the reform took place despite the fact that no fundamental change in the political regime had occurred. Instead of the six regions from the previous phase, three large regions were established, and the number of districts was reduced to one-third, totaling 33. In 1968, the status of Bratislava as the capital and an independent territorial unit at the regional level was amended, making Bratislava, as the capital, the fourth region as well.

In the period that followed, some districts were reorganized due to their unusually large size, and four new districts were created: Veľký Krtíš, Stará Ľubovňa, Svidník, and Vranov nad Topľou. Another change at the district level took place on July 1, 1969, when the Košice District was divided into the Košice-City District and the Košice-Rural District. This phase lasted until 1990, making it the longest phase of territorial administration during the existence of the Czechoslovak state (Bačík, 2022).

Map 10: Regions “kraje” and Districts in Slovakia, 1960–1990



Source: [http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_10.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_10.png)

### 1.11 The Current Territorial and Administrative Structure of Slovakia (since 1996)

In 1990, the regions “kraje” were dissolved. They were reestablished in 1996, and their number was increased to eight. Slovakia was thus divided into 8 regions “krajov” and 79 districts, including 9 urban districts (Bratislava – 5, Košice – 4). The established regions are named after their regional capitals, with the 7 largest cities selected as regional capitals, along with Trenčín, the 9th largest city. The main quantitative criterion for selecting districts was a population threshold of 30,000. Of the established districts, nowadays 5 do not meet this threshold (Banská Štiavnica, Medzilaborce, Krupina, Poltár, Žarnovica) (Bačík, 2022).

Map 5: Map 11. Regions “kraje” and Districts in Slovakia, 1996–Present



[http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr\\_historia/mapa\\_12.png](http://www.sodbtn.sk/obce2/obr_historia/mapa_12.png)

## 2. The Development of Administrative Divisions and Regional Identity in Slovakia

### 2.1 Overall Assessment of the Stages of Slovakia’s Administrative-Territorial Division

A historical overview of the individual stages confirms a strong correlation between changes in territorial administration and political changes within a given state entity. With one exception, all changes in territorial organization occurred following a significant prior political and social upheaval (the revolutionary years of 1848–49, the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the Vienna Arbitration of 1938, World War II, and the onset of the communist era in 1948). The exception was the change in territorial organization in 1960, when efforts to implement larger administrative units based on the Soviet model were carried out (Slavík, V., 1997b).

In Hungary, or rather Austria-Hungary, the systems of territorial administration were characterized by a high degree of stability; in contrast, during the Czechoslovak era, there were frequent changes in the various models. Throughout its history, Slovakia was only once organized as a single territorial administrative unit, namely under the provincial administration from 1928 to 1938.

The time periods of the various stages of territorial administration show that there was usually a transitional period between the different systems, during which a new system of administration was being established.

Some administrative regions that developed within the territory of Slovakia during the Hungarian Empire extended beyond the current borders of Hungary, and the administrative centers of these regions were located outside the territory of Slovakia. These were the counties “stolice/župy” in southern Slovakia and the Uzh County “stolica/župa” in eastern Slovakia. (See Table 1.) The centers of the oldest administrative regions were located in castles. Later, in the 17th century, administrative functions began to shift to towns, a trend reinforced by the construction of administrative buildings.

While the traditional historical regions had relatively stable centers, the regions in southern Slovakia lack significant historical centers, precisely because the administrative centers of these territories are located outside Slovakia, as mentioned earlier (Slavík, V., 1997b).

Table 1: The area of the counties “župy” and the proportion of their territory within Slovakia

| County “župa”      | area km <sup>2</sup> | in Slovakia (in %) |
|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Nitrianska         | 5519                 | 100                |
| Trenčianska        | 4456                 | 100                |
| Šarišská           | 3652                 | 100                |
| Tekovská           | 2724                 | 100                |
| Zvolenská          | 2730                 | 100                |
| Liptovská          | 2247                 | 100                |
| Turčianska         | 1123                 | 100                |
| Bratislavská       | 4370                 | 98                 |
| Spišská            | 3668                 | 94                 |
| Oravská            | 3323                 | 86                 |
| Hontianska         | 2633                 | 82                 |
| Zemplínska         | 6269                 | 72                 |
| Abovsko-Turnianská | 3323                 | 49                 |
| Komárňanska        | 2843                 | 48                 |
| Ostrihomská        | 1076                 | 48                 |
| Novohradská        | 4133                 | 42                 |
| Užská              | 3230                 | 32                 |
| Mošonská           | 2013                 | 4                  |
| Rábska             | 1527                 | 4                  |

Source: Compiled by the author

## 2.2 The Impact of Slovakia's Administrative Division on Regional Identity

Changes in territorial division throughout Slovakia's history have led to a layering of regional identity. A typical example is the superimposition of a regional identity based on the administrative division into counties “stolice” or “župy” over the original regional identity based on the region “kraje” system. This is also interesting from a historical perspective, as the territorial division into counties and districts (known as “župy” from 1849 onward) lasted from the Middle Ages until the First Czechoslovak Republic. Meanwhile, the administrative division into the so-called “major regions” (Western Slovakia, Central Slovakia, and Eastern Slovakia) lasted from 1960 to 1996. This is most evident in eastern Slovakia, where the majority of the population identifies as “Easterners” and only a smaller portion as people from Šariš, Spiš, Zemplín, Abov, or Gemer. In Central Slovakia, the Central Slovak identity is also strong, but compared to Eastern Slovakia, older regional identities such as “Oravci” and “Liptáci” are more prominent there. In the border regions, where a significant portion lay outside the territory of Slovakia (for example, the Esztergom, Abov, and Novohrad regions), regional identity based on counties is the weakest.

A distinctive feature of some instances of regional identity in Slovakia is that it has developed independently of territorial-administrative divisions. For example, regional identities have emerged based on geomorphological divisions, such as the Tatránci, Horehronci, and Záhoráci. This type of identity is most pronounced among the Záhoráci, which is also linked to distinct linguistic and cultural attributes related to the Moravian region of Slovákco. The identities of the Gorals, Mantáks, and Sotáks are also characterized by linguistic and cultural attributes. A

specific regional identity is the division into Dolniaci and Horniáci, based on significant differences in elevation.

## Conclusion

When it comes to the formation of regional identity, the length of time a region has existed is the most important factor, as evidenced by the tendency to identify with the former county or district administrative divisions. In border regions, where a significant portion lay outside the territory of Slovakia, regional identity based on these districts is significantly weaker. The second factor appears to be the size of the territory, as the so-called “major regions” (1960–1996) are still used in regional identity even thirty years after their dissolution. This factor is reinforced by the differences between the dialects of Central and Eastern Slovakia.

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## Primary Paper Section: A

## Secondary Paper Section: DE, AB