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## Between the East and the West : Slovakia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (1993–2004)

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**Krzysztof Żarna**

**BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST.  
SLOVAKIA AND THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY  
ORGANIZATION (1993–2004)**

**1. Introduction**

The aim of the paper is to present the process of Slovakia's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), pointing to its specific features with a particular emphasis on the impact of the political situation in that country as well as attempts to re-build the Russian influences in the region. The time frame is delimited by the year of 1993 (in which the Slovak Republic was established) and 2004 (when it formally became a member of NATO).

After 1989, the states of Central Europe were in a new geo-political situation, being left in a „grey zone of security” located between the states that belonged to NATO on the one side and Russia on the other side. Taking into account several decades of their historical experiences, some fears arose in the milieu of their political elites and in the societies of the region that the sphere of Russian influences might be re-built there. Those fears constituted one of the factors determining the policies of the Czechoslovak Federation, Poland and Hungary. Those states made integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures priorities of their foreign policies.

The situation changed after the Federation was split into two independent states, which was formally executed on 1 January in 1993. The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary consistently acted to achieve the aforementioned goals – they succeeded in the case of NATO in 1999. By contrast, Slovakia, due to its complex domestic political situation in the period between 1994 and 1998, was left in international isolation.

## **2. Moscow or Washington? The search for a right direction in security policy**

In the period between 1993 and 1998, Vladimír Mečiar, the leader of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and Slovak Prime Minister (remaining in office for three terms) proved to be the person who exerted the greatest impact on the policy pursued by Slovakia in that period. One may not speak of a consistent and unified foreign policy over that period, however, since the Slovak President, Michal Kováč, represented quite a different political line. The coalition of HZDS, the Union of the Slovak Workers (ZRS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) effectively excluded Slovakia out of the integration processes, enabling Russia to partly regain initiative in Central Europe (Morawiec 2001: 88).

The initial political declarations issued by Bratislava suggested a pro-western orientation of the state. Slovakia officially applied for NATO membership on 31 January in 1996 that is at the apex of Mečiar's rule. It is worth referring to some statistical data evidencing the level of support of the Slovak society for the transatlantic idea. In April of 1996, barely 37% of the Slovaks were in favor of integration with NATO (Łoś 2007: 57–58). More and more often opinions were voiced that indicated neutrality as an option for the country or advocated its pro-eastern orientation – good neighborhood treaties were signed with Romania and Ukraine – or even military cooperation with Russia. In Moscow, the Slovak Minister of Defense, Imrich Andrejčák, stated that his country had never on its own asked to be admitted to NATO and that in its foreign policy it would always reckon with Russia's stance. The Minister signed a protocol in which he agreed to buy Russian military equipment in congruence with a contract signed by the Slovak and Russian Defense Ministries in August of 1993 in Bratislava. To justify their eastern policy preferences, the Slovaks stressed that their aim was not to built a wall dividing their country from NATO but rather to make certain that Slovakia had effective security guarantees (Herman 2000: 157). All of the official statements issued by the Slovak government indicated its pro-western attitude and a will to cooperate, which is why the interpretation of the evolution of the Slovak-Russian relations is so difficult. During the visit of the Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin in Bratislava on 14 February in 1995, several intergovernmental and inter-ministerial agreements were signed. Prime

Minister Mečiar declared that the Slovak policy towards Russia was a model for others to follow. The visit of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Evgenii Primakov also turned out an opportunity to discuss mutual cooperation and the issue of NATO membership. The leaning towards Russia was dictated by the dependence of the Slovak economy on the imports of raw materials from Russia and on the Slovak exports to the eastern market. The political groupings of SNS and ZRS also opposed Slovakia's integration with NATO fearing that the country's heavy industry and military industry would collapse – as a result, they preferred the Russian security guarantees (Duleba 2001: 20–35).

At Pieszczany a meeting was held attended by prime ministers of Austria, Hungary and Slovakia. Franz Vranitzky, Gyula Horn and Vladimír Mečiar dedicated much time to discuss their bilateral relations. The Austrian guest assured them on his part that Vienna supported Slovakia and Hungary on their way to NATO and the European Union. Taking care of good relations with its neighbors, Slovakia tried to be more active at the international forum and to gain support of the Union's member states. Despite this support, politicians from Western Europe had many reservations regarding Slovakia's membership in the European Union or NATO (Herman 2000: 162).

### **3. The referendum and the lost chance**

The referendum concerning the country's accession to NATO, the location of foreign military units and nuclear arms on its territory, carried out in Slovakia on 23 and 24 May in 1997, did not bring any unequivocal results. The turnout at the level of 9,5% led to the annulment of the referendum. The low turnout was *inter alia* caused by the boycott on part of the Slovak society. In this way Slovakia closed the door leading to the transatlantic structures and was not invited to become a NATO member together with Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary. Analysts of the Institute of Public Affairs were of the opinion that if the Slovaks thought of NATO seriously, they had to verify their political preferences and think of replacing their Prime Minister with a new one. The analysts stressed that because of Mečiar Slovakia was „moved” from Central Europe to the Balkans. Anti-democratic internal policy and undecided foreign policy were not liked in the West. The Visegrad Group, including Central European countries, which used to be perceived in international relations as a certain geopolitical and economic

whole, became a thing of the past (Szczepaniak 1998: 53–54, Herman 2000: 163).

Regarding its accession to NATO, Slovakia was not included in the first group of the states aspiring to the transatlantic structures. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary were invited to begin membership negotiations during the Madrid summit held on 8 July in 1997 (Marušiak 1999: 274–275). Despite the fact that the Slovak government declared its will to accede to the Euro-Atlantic structures, there was much evidence that it broke democratic principles. The list of reservations was in this respect very long: special services of the state were used to fight the opposition, public radio and television were government-dominated, some ambivalent aspects during privatization came to the fore, and arrogant attitudes toward the head of the state as well as infringements on the rights of the minorities were manifest. The aforementioned referendum and the way it had been carried out proved an embarrassment.

#### **4. The breakthrough election**

During the campaign preceding the parliamentary election of 1998, the issue of accession to the transatlantic structures became a flag ship in the programs of the Slovak political parties. In principle, besides the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) and SNS, the remaining political groupings stressed the necessity of integration with NATO (Wlachovský 1998: 63–75).

The election to the National Council proved to reconfirm the success of HZDS (43 mandates won). Another five political parties were also elected to the Slovak parliament at the time: the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) – 42 mandates, the Democratic Left Party (SDL) – 23 mandates, Parties of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) – 15 mandates, SNS – 14 mandates, the Party of Citizens' Agreement (SOP) – 13 mandates. In the situation in which HZDS was not able to form a coalition, the anti-Mečiar parties created a „broad coalition” led by the Prime Minister Mikulaš Dzurind (SDK, SDL, SMK and SOP). The coalition had 93 seats at the National Council (Mesežnikov. 1999: 24–26).

Referring to the opinions expressed by the journalists of „Domino Forum”, Maciej Herman stated that in the new cabinet's policies one could still see many of the elements typical of Mečiar's policies. The West already accused Slovakia of vassal political subordination to

Kremlin. Commentators pointed out that there was no review of the ill conceived interstate agreements concerning, inter alia, the supply of the Russian anti-missile system S-300. What was worse, the Minister of Economy, Ludovít Černák, signed in Moscow a contract concerning the supply of oil until 2014 that had been prepared by the Mečiar cabinet. It was suggested that yet another chance for integration with the West could thus have been wasted (Herman 2000: 166).

However, ultimately, during the summit in Washington, Slovakia was named as one of the most serious candidates for NATO membership. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary, acting in the role of the region's lobbyists came to learn that the list of the future members would be restricted to Romania, Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Macedonia and Albania. The improved attitude to Slovakia constituted a response to the changes occurring in this country. Visiting the USA at the beginning of 1999, Eduard Kukan, the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that his visit was an opportunity to present a new face of his state as a state respectful of democracy. During the talks with Madeleine Albright he was told that Slovakia was on the right way to win the position of a partner in Europe and the world – a position that it deserved. Noticing several issues that lagged behind, Kukan declared that the Slovaks had still a lot of work to do and they did not ask for any concessions in this respect. According to some Central Eastern leaders, the process of NATO enlargement should not proceed too fast. The Czech President, Vaclav Havel, when evaluating the chances of the future candidates, stated that the decision concerning their membership was to depend on the level of their preparedness. It was unknown when and how they would be accepted: each separately, in groups or all together. Nevertheless from the Czech perspective, Slovakia was perceived as one of the most serious candidates. In Bratislava the issue of the potential membership in the military pact bred variegated reactions. The chairman of the oppositional SNS, Jan Slota, frequently voiced his firm „no” regarding his country's accession to NATO. According to him, such an option could endanger Slovakia's interests (Herman 2000: 166).

At the end of April and beginning of May in 1999, another presidential campaign began in Slovakia. The election was to decide whether the country would be able to continue the democratic reforms and consistently aim at joining the transatlantic structures. The elegant competition for the office of President ended when Mečiar came back to the political scene. It was emphasized that the former Prime Minister

was back in politics despite the lost parliamentary elections and his public declarations that he was out of politics. Mass media warned that during the first general presidential elections one could expect a foul campaign. All this resulted in the fact that despite successful coping with its economic crisis and the rapprochement with NATO and the EU, Slovakia was found at the crossroads facing a very real vision that Mečiar would win again. Initially nine candidates for the office ran in the election. The most chances to be elected were attributed to SOP's leader Rudolf Schuster, HZDS's leader Mečiar, the former Czechoslovak ambassador in Vienna Magda Vašaryova, SNS's leader Slota and the former President Kováč. Eventually, in the second round Schuster won with 57,18% of votes, while the former Prime Minister was supported by 42,82% of the voters (Madera 2001: 104–110). The election results facilitated the cooperation between the Prime Minister and President in the area of foreign policy, which was seen as a decisive factor from the point of view of the future course of events.

## 5. From Washington to Prague (1999–2002)

In the meantime, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary had filed documents ratifying the Washington Treaty (on 12 March in 1999). The USA were afraid that leaving out of NATO states, such as Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, could give rise to a threat that a „grey zone of security” would develop in Central Europe (*Europa Środkowa...*1999: 196) and that zone would get rearranged by Russia. Nevertheless, after the expansion of NATO, the admission of new members ceased to be the Treaty's priority. It became concentrated on its operation in Kosovo and on the negotiations of its relations with the European Union, which just at the time was busy developing its own military forces within the framework of Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Following the Washington summit, the Slovaks began their wide-scale cooperation with NATO: they sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina 150 of their soldiers within the framework of the peace operation (SFOR), agreed to have their airspace used by NATO air forces attacking Yugoslavia and allowed for transit transportation of the Treaty's military equipment and soldiers. The Slovak government decided also that humanitarian assistance should be granted to the refugees from Kosovo to the limit of ca. 2 million dollars. Apart from this, the work

of the inter-ministerial committee to coordinate the fulfillment of the membership conditions was to be intensified. At the same time „Individual Partnership Program” in the framework of „Partnership for Peace” was elaborated by Slovakia and NATO to start in 1999 (Žarna 2008: 66). The activity of the Slovak government satisfied the Treaty’s authorities. In April of 1999, during the NATO summit in Washington, a plan for membership was adopted. In October the Slovak government approved of the document „The national program of preparing the Slovak Republic for the membership in NATO” – NP.PRENAME (Čurda, Zatlkaj. 2003: 75–76, 80–85). The program’s aim was to coordinate all action to achieve the membership status. It envisaged cooperation within the framework of the already mentioned „Partnership for Peace” program. Eventually, the next group of candidate states: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Macedonia continued their preparations according to the procedures that had been adopted in 1999. Subsequently, in Vilnius, 18 through 19 May in 2000, there was a meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs representing the candidate countries who issued a joint declaration in which they urged the Treaty to invite their states to NATO (*Europa Środkowa...*2001: 281–282).

During an extraordinary meeting in Brussels, held on 14 June in 2001, a decision was taken that during its Prague summit in November of 2002, the Treaty would invite new states. In spite of the fact that Slovakia was listed in the group of the best prepared candidates, NATO authorities were worried by the strong pre-electoral support for HZDS; they reminded the Slovaks in this context that it was necessary to observe the democratic procedures. Paradoxically, Mečiar himself proposed that all of the major political parties should reach an agreement concerning their cooperation with the aim of accomplishing the country’s membership in NATO, while the issue of accession to the Treaty became one of the fundamental points of the electoral program of HZDS. Prime Minister Dzurinda believed it was a ruse. On the one hand Mečiar claimed that NATO was the only alternative for Slovakia. On the other hand he was against the operation in Kosovo. He reminded that not so long before the former Prime Minister wanted to remove from the office the Foreign Affairs Minister Kukan because of the fact that Dzurinda’s cabinet so staunchly favored Slovakia’s accession to the Treaty (Dzurinda 2001: 10).

The stance adopted by Slovakia in the period between 1999 and 2001 was a relevant factor on the way of this country to NATO. In spite



of Russia's protests, the internal opposition and dissatisfaction on part of the Slovak society, the Slovaks opened their air space for NATO aircraft taking part in the Kosovo operation. They gave also up the purchase of the military equipment negotiated by Mečiar – the Russian anti-missile system S-300. Moreover, Slovakia increased its participation in peace operations both under the aegis of the United Nations and NATO. At the beginning of 2002, 760 Slovak soldiers were involved in missions of this kind (Morawiec 2002: 566).

The candidate countries continued their cooperation in the framework of the „Vilnius group”. Their prime ministers met in Bratislava (10–11 May, 2001), Budapest (29–30 May, 2001) and Vilnius (1–2 July, 2001). In October of 2001, in the Slovenian city of Bled, there was a meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs, and in Sofia of the presidents. The next meetings within the framework of this group were continued in 2002: on 25 March in Bucharest and on 5 and 6 July in Riga. The Vilnius group included the following states: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (*Europa Środkowa...2003*: 259). Ultimately Slovakia, together with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria, was invited to become a NATO member during the Treaty's summit in Prague, held on 21 and 22 November in 2002 (Čurda, Zatlakaj 2003: 108–111; Łoś 2007: 75). It formally became one on 2 April in 2004.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Out of all Central European states Slovakia's road was the most difficult. This resulted primarily because of the period in which the coalition of HZDS-ZRS-SNS ruled in the country slowing down the integration of the state with the European Union and NATO in 1994–1998. Russia tried to control the „grey zone of security” that was then created. In the situation in which Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary became NATO members, Slovakia could become Russia's „foot-hold” of a kind.

Following the parliamentary election held in 1998 and then the presidential election in 1999, the direction of the Slovak foreign policy was re-oriented. Slovakia consistently pursued the policy aimed at as quick as possible accession to NATO. It was supported in this respect by its partners from the Visegrad Group. The opening of its air space

for NATO aircraft during the Treaty's operation in Kosovo and withholding the execution of the contract negotiated with Russia by the Mečiar cabinet, concerning the supply of the Russian anti-missile system, proved to be important factors facilitating Slovakia's application for the membership in NATO. As a result, having fulfilled all of the obligatory criteria, in 2004 Slovakia became a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, whereas NATO became the major element of the Slovak Republic's foreign and security policy.

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