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A Central European Pact? Hungary in the Slovak Republic's Foreign Policy (1998–2006)

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IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC'S FOREIGN POLICY
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1. Introductory remarks

During his inaugural speech in Strasbourg, the Chairman of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, declared his readiness to help solve the Slovak-Hungarian disagreement concerning a language law that strongly limits the rights of the Hungarian minority to use their mother tongue (Z. z. 2009: 318). His exposé of September 2009 evidences the fact that the issue of tense Slovak-Hungarian relations is still valid and demands some regulation.

The aim of this paper is to present bilateral relations of Slovakia and Hungary. The temporal frame is delimited by the years 1998 and 2006, constituting the period when Mikulaš Dzurinda's cabinet governed Slovakia. Mikulaš Dzurinda was in a difficult situation, taking over from Vladimír Mečiar during whose rule the Slovak-Hungarian relations had been very tense. The most controversial issues to be regulated were: the case of the Hungarian minority, the Beneš decrees, the controversy regarding the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam and the Magyar Charter. It seems that this attempt to normalize the relations was dictated by pragmatism: without it, it would be impossible for the Slovak Republic to join the Euro-Atlantic structures.

2. The „Mečiarism” (1994–1998)

Vladimír Mečiar, the leader of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) was the politician who had determined the shape of the Slovak political scene for many years. Assisted by his coalition

allies from the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS), he introduced several legal changes that aimed at cumulating the most power in his own hands. His use of secret services in political struggles, his attacks against the opposition, infringements upon the freedom of speech, and lack of respect for rights of the Roma and Hungarian minorities (Sobolewska-Myšlik 2004: 131–141; Żarna 2009a: 165–183) resulted in Slovakia's isolation in the international arena and in its crowding out of the group of states aspiring to NATO and the EU (Čurda, Zatlakaj 2003: *passim*; Żarna 2009b: 132–139).

The situation changed in 1998. The election to the National Council proved again to be HZDA's success (43 mandates). Five more groupings won parliamentary seats: Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) – 42 mandates, Party of Democratic Left (SDL) – 23 mandates, Parties of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) – 15 mandates, SNS – 14 mandates, Party of Civic Alliance (SOP) – 13 mandates (Krivý 1999: 115–126). Since HZDS was not able to form a parliamentary majority, anti-Mečiar parties created a „broad coalition” (SDK, SDL, SMK and SOP) led by Prime Minister Dzurinda (Mesežnikov 1999: 24–26), who initiated a period of dynamic transformations.

3. An attempt at normalization

Dzurinda realised that it was necessary to improve the situation of the Slovak Hungarians in order to improve the image of Slovakia in the international arena. Only owing to the observance of the minority rights, could Slovakia break out of the isolation and return to its place in the uniting Europe. The inclusion of representatives of the Slovak Hungarians in the governing coalition was an important gesture. In the new cabinet, the SMK representatives got the office of deputy Prime Minister responsible for national minorities and human rights and deputy Minister for Education with responsibility for minority schooling (Mesežnikov 1999: 25). On the one hand, this was a friendly gesture towards Budapest, while on the other – one could venture a statement that Dzurinda must have needed the Slovak Hungarians badly to push the whole package of reforms through.

In November of 1998, during a meeting of diplomacy heads of both states in Rome, they agreed that the existing bilateral problems should not burden their political relations and that they would be transferred to

an expert level. Also, a protocol was signed envisaging establishing commissions to supervise the implementation of the constitutional treaty of 1995 (Z.z. 1997: 115). Slovakia and Hungary agreed to establish a bilateral working group tasked with joint preparations for PHARE programmes. During the period under Dzurinda's cabinet, some of the unconstitutional legal acts infringing upon minority rights were repealed. The Constitution guaranteed the national and ethnic minorities the right to develop their own culture, to promulgate and receive information in their languages, to establish associations, national organisations and educational institutions (Ústava SR 1992: 6, 33, 34). In July of 1999, the Slovak Parliament adopted a bill on languages of national minorities (Z.z. 1999: 184) that guaranteed their right to use their mother tongues in communes inhabited by at least 20% of the minority residents. On the basis of this law, the minority representatives were allowed to communicate at offices, issue documents and carry out the commune sessions in their own language. This law was met with diversified reactions on part of the Slovak Hungarians. On the one hand, satisfaction was bred by the fact that their language rights had been guaranteed by law, on the other hand, however, the Hungarians called for the lowering of the percentage threshold down to 10%, which would enable them to take advantage of the rights in a bigger number of communes in which the Hungarians resided (Kužniar 2000: 234).

The support lent by Hungary to the Slovak aspirations to join the EU and NATO was another sign of warmer relations. Prime Minister Victor Orban stated that Hungary took upon itself an obligation to provide its assistance in this respect both on the level of bilateral relations and multilateral ones, which he announced during his visit in Bratislava on 16 February in 1999. It was decided then, *inter alia*, that a bridge on the Danube River that had been destroyed during World War II, connecting the Slovak Sturovo and the Hungarian Esztergom, would be rebuilt to symbolise the reconciliation (Kužniar 1999: 188). This visit was recognised as a beginning of a new phase in the contacts between the two states.

4. The Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam disagreement

The disagreement regarding the energy complex Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros continued, which was to be resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague. The procedure was initiated in

March of 1997. It was started despite declarations on both sides that they would attempt to deal with the problem in a conciliatory manner. Ultimately, on 26 September, ICJ issued its sentence (International Court of Justice 1997) in which Hungary was blamed with the breaking of an agreement of 1977 that was recognised as still binding, while Slovakia was blamed with changing the course of the Danube River. A recommendation was given that each of the countries should make a compensation to the other for those unilateral actions and that talks aiming at resumption of the full implementation of that agreement should be started. The talks began in autumn and lasted till mid-February in 1998. In spite of fears that because of political reasons, such as electoral campaigns that were launched just then in both of the countries reaching an agreement would not be possible, it was indeed reached before the deadline indicated by ICJ elapsed. This suggested that both of the sides managed to overcome the standstill. However, the pre-electoral campaigns carried out then in each of the states ignited the mutual relations again. In particular, the SNS members were constantly raising the issue of a threat constituted by the Hungarians (Žarna 2008: 68).

5. The Beneš decrees

The Beneš decrees constituted a problem inherited from the past, having been a legal ground on which the German, Austrian and Hungarian minorities were resettled from the Czechoslovak territory after World War II (Šutaj, Mosný, Olejník 2002: *passim*). They negatively impacted on the relations between Czechs and Germany and Austria as well as between Slovakia and Hungary, additionally affecting the Visegrad cooperation, too. In February of 2002, Prime Minister Orbán stated that he could not imagine a situation in which a state was allowed to access the EU that retained that type of legislation in its legal system. Orbán tried to convince the international public opinion that the decrees were not only a Czech-German problem or a Slovak-Hungarian one but in fact an all-European one (Olszański 2002: 45). The Hungarian opposition was of a different opinion, whose representatives maintained that Orbán's position could negatively impinge upon the process of integration of Central and Eastern European states with the EU.

6. The Magyar Charter

The issue that aggravated the relations between Budapest and its neighbours was a legal act concerning Hungarians residing abroad in the neighbouring states. The so called Magyar Charter (www.mfa.gov.hu), adopted as of 19 June in 2001, and coming into force as of 1 January 2002, granted the persons of Hungarian nationality living in Romania, Yugoslavia, Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine several privileges of social, professional, educational and cultural nature. For example, having been granted the certificate that one belonged to the Hungarian nation, one was to be entitled to legal employment in Hungary for three months, free of charge studies at Hungarian schools of tertiary education, free of charge medical care at Hungarian health care institutions, a subsidy for educating children at local schools in Hungarian as the language of instruction. The Hungarian minority in Austria was exempted from this act as the EU declared that it would not tolerate any positive discrimination of its citizens – and the privileges envisaged in the Hungarian law were regarded as such. The initiation and adoption of this law (supported also by votes of the opposition) was unequivocally explained as a product of a pre-electoral year since the issue of best possible care taken of the Hungarian diaspora constituted an important element in Hungarian politics. It is worth stressing that similar regulations have obtained since 1992 in Slovakia and since 1998 in Romania as regards Moldova. The Hungarian act even at the stage of its drafting provoked criticisms abroad, mainly in Romania and Slovakia, where the most numerous populations of Hungarians live. Politicians of both these states stated that this law stood in conflict not only with the binding bilateral treaties with Hungary but that it also meant interference in their internal legal orders. However, each of the states dealt with that act in a different manner. Towards the end of December in 2001, Romania concluded an agreement with Hungary that, among others, extended the right to seasonal employment in Hungary to all of its citizens. Slovakia took a more fundamentalist position, believing that the Hungarian act was an infringement upon its home affairs and that it broke resolutions included in their treaty on friendship of 1995 as well as infringing upon international law, which practically excluded a possibility to work out a compromise (Grabiński 2002: 8; Morvay 2002: 12–13; Kuźniar 2002: 274–275). Prime Minister Dzurinda stated that he himself did not demand that that act was abolished in total. He objected to the fact that „Budapest wants to pay forints to Slovakia’s citizens for sending their children to Hungarian schools. Most subtly speaking, that is discrimination against Slovak citizens for ethnic rea-

sons. Secondly, I am uncomfortable with the fact that organizations are to act in Slovakia that are not official representatives of the neighbouring state but who aim at some cooperation based on the Magyar Charter. This is interfering in the independent jurisdiction of our state” (Dzurinda 2002: 20).

In February of 2002, the Slovak Parliament voted against such regulations and the Slovak position was reconfirmed by Prime Minister Dzurinda during his visit in Budapest in November of 2002. This surprised the Hungarian side who had expected that following the political changes in both of the countries a compromise between them was possible modelled on the Romanian-Hungarian agreement. The Slovak stance was indirectly supported by the European Commission. In November, the Commissioner for EU Enlargement, Günther Verheugen, sent a letter to the Hungarian Prime Minister in which he criticised the Magyar Charter for granting multiple privileges to Hungarian minorities in adjacent countries, for its extritoriality and discrimination against non-Hungarian populations (Kuźniar 2003: 250).

Despite some changes that were introduced in the Charter by Hungary because of the EU’s and Council of Europe’s criticisms, Bratislava opposed its implementation in Slovakia, using the argument that it would mean an interference in its internal affairs. Negotiations lasting for many months produced results only at the end of the year, when on 6 December in 2003, a joint Slovak-Hungarian commission agreed on a draft of an agreement concerning assistance granted to national minorities. The compromise was thus reached on this most controversial issue, by defining the addressees and distributors of such financial assistance. This agreement came into force as of February 2004 (Kuźniar 2004: 241).

7. The escalation of tensions

Despite the positive signal provided in February of 2004 by the implementation of the Hungarian-Slovak agreement concerning their support for the national minorities in the sphere of culture and education, demands for compensation of harm done in the past did not fade, which were supported, if not incited, by the rightist Union of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Party (FIDESZ) and the Hungarian Party of Justice and Life. One of the examples was a demand by the Union of the Hungarians deported from Slovakia that was directed to Prime Min-

ister Dzurinda concerning the payment of compensation for those Slovak Hungarians or their families that had been forcibly resettled in the years of 1945–1948 to the areas of western Czechoslovakia. Their petition was rejected by the Slovak side. The representatives of the Hungarian opposition who voiced the need to grant autonomy to the Hungarians in Romania, articulated the same demands in Slovakia, promising their legal and financial assistance to those Hungarians who would file requests for the return of the property from which they had been expropriated. The culmination of that political line, which the government did not oppose in full voice because of tactical reasons, was a unison decision taken by the Hungarian Parliament to carry out a referendum regarding the issue of granting double citizenship to the Hungarians living abroad. The petition that was needed to start the process was filed by the World Union of Hungarians. In the circumstances, the government suggested a negative voting, fearing too big an influx of labour force, an increase in budget expenditures and deterioration of relations with the neighbours. The opposition, using the argument that motherland had a duty to take care of the Hungarians living abroad, called for a vote in favour of the double citizenship. However, the referendum held on 5 December in 2004, turned out invalid because of low attendance that did not exceed the 50% threshold. At the beginning of January in 2005, Ferenc Gyurcsány's cabinet proposed an alternative to the idea of the double citizenship: instead of facilitating contacts between diasporas and Hungary or their resettlement to Hungary, the government declared that it would support requests for autonomy of the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring states. This provoked an automatic opposition on part of the Slovak authorities and politicians (Kuzniar 2005: 246–247).

Following the victory in the parliamentary election of 2006, Robert Fico, the leader of the Smer grouping became the new Slovak Prime Minister, who made a coalition with Vladimír Mečiar's party and Jan Slota's SNS. Slota was known for many anti-Hungarian statements that shocked public opinion throughout Europe. He stated, *inter alia*, that the Slav blood civilised the „Mongol Magyars”, while describing the Hungarian minority in Slovakia as „a cancer on the body of the Slovak nation”. One of the biggest scandals occurred on 9 May in 2008, when he publicly called the founder of the Hungarian state, King Istvan I the Saint a „clown on a horse”. In reaction, the Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány called off his planned visit in Slovakia (Pawlicki 2008: 10), which was an unprecedented incident.

8. Concluding remarks

In the present paper we have outlined some problems in bilateral Slovak-Hungarian relations. There were and there are many barriers on the road to their mutual understanding. The long-lasting dependence of the Slovaks on the Hungarians – and the process of magyarization that it had entailed – caused an increase in nationalist tensions both in the milieu of the politicians and the Slovak society. The further factors that intensified the reciprocal aversion included: the resolutions of the Trianon Treaty, the Beneš decrees, *casus* of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, the controversy regarding the Dam on the Danube River, the stances taken by the nationalist groupings. The situation was the worst during the Vladimír Mečiar's premiership (1994–1998). It might seem that following the election of 1998 and the change of government in Slovakia, the situation would evolve towards normalization in the bilateral relations, all the more so that both states aspired to the European Union. In fact, what did take place were periodical escalations of the conflict.

The negative aspects of the mutual Slovak-Hungarian relations obscure to an extent the positive ones. It is worth mentioning that both states were forced to collaborate in order to achieve their foreign policy priorities, that is to integrate with the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. For this purpose regional co-operation within the framework of the Visegrad Group was resumed. A question arises whether that was the factor that led to normalization of their bilateral relations. It seems it was not. Both of the states accomplished their most important objective which had required their co-operation. Nonetheless, a series of controversial issues apparently continues to block the road to their ultimate reconciliation. The compensation claims remain an unresolved issue. In spite of the fact that the peak of the claims occurred during Victor Orbán's rule in Hungary in 2002, they constitute a current topic. Likewise, high emotions are still incited by the SNS politicians whose aggressive public statements attack Budapest. This is all the more disquieting that the present head of the Bratislava government, Robert Fico, appears to ignore such incidents. In Hungary, in turn, an extremist nationalist party Jobbik has started to play an ever more significant role on the political scene; the party's representatives voice aggressive statements aimed against Slovakia.

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