

SLOVAKIA TWO YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Slovakia's first elections since independence at the end of September, 1994, were controversial and fiercely contested. The British Helsinki Human Rights Group sent observers to them. It was not the first time that they had been to the country. Members of the Group have connections with Czechoslovakia going back more than twenty years. However, its first delegation visited Slovakia between 3-8th December, 1992. They met representatives of the government, political parties, local government, academics, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and unaffiliated members of the public. The members of the delegation are grateful to everyone whom they met for their time and assistance.

The principal focuses of the delegation's work then were:

- 1) The treatment of ethnic minorities, especially the Hungarian-speaking population.
- 2) The related issue of the controversial Gabčíkovo dam project in so far as its construction and operation affects the local population.
- 3) Academic freedom, particularly in regard to the Trnava University project.
- 4) Press freedom

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918 at the end of the First World War as one of the successor states to the collapsed Habsburg Monarchy. Before 1918, the Czechs had been subjects of the Habsburg ruler in his capacity as Austrian Emperor and King of Bohemia since 1620, while the Slovaks had been subjects of the Hungarian Crown of St. Stephen for almost one thousand years. Bohemia's independent status before 1620 (albeit with an elected Habsburg ruler in the decades before the Thirty Years War) gave the Czechs a different historical status.

The Munich Agreement (30th September, 1938) set in train the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. President Benes went into exile and Emil Hacha assumed the presidency, but the growth of German power encouraged Slovak nationalism.

On 14th March, 1939, egged on by German influence, the Slovak nationalists led by Monsignor Tiso declared the "Independent State of Slovakia". This precipitated the collapse of rump Czechoslovakia. On 15th March, Hitler's army entered Bohemia and Moravia under the pretext of re-establishing "public order" and established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Until the final defeat of the German forces there on 12th May, 1945, Bohemia and Moravia were ruled directly by a German Protector in Prague albeit President Hacha's government nominally continued to function under his supervision.

The situation in Bratislava was different. The new Slovak government owed its independence to Hitler's power, but it was not directly subordinated to a Nazi proconsul. Throughout the years 1939-45, the Slovak regime was in a much stronger position to determine its own internal policies. In practice, these fell into line with German desires, often anticipating Nazi wishes (as was the case with other collaborationist states like Vichy France) before they were formally expressed.

Unlike Bohemia and Moravia, however, and only partly as a result of more favourable terrain, Slovakia developed an anti-fascist resistance movement which operated both against the Tiso forces and the Germans as the fighting front in the east drew nearer to Slovak territory. When the Red Army entered eastern Slovakia in August, 1944, a partisan rising assisted their advance by disrupting the German Army's rear.

Despite the formal alliance between Hungary and the "Independent State of Slovakia" during the Second World War, relations between the Tiso and Horthy regimes were bad. The Hungarian treatment of Slovakia in the decades before the First World War was undoubtedly much harsher than the Austrian approach to the Czechs. Attempts at Magyarization and to suppress Slovak culture left a bitter legacy. The bad blood between Hungarians and Slovaks was continually stoked up during the inter-war period because the Horthy regime in Budapest was unwilling to accept the loss of territory by the Treaty of Trianon. After the Slovak declaration of independence in 1939, Hungary's claims to southern Slovakia and the trans-Carpathian Ukraine were endorsed by Hitler and the Tiso regime was obliged to cede substantial territories to Hungary. The renewed suppression of Slovak culture in those areas enhanced the pre-existing bitterness between Slovaks and Hungarians, despite the fact that both "Independent Slovakia" and Hungary were Axis allies against the Soviet Union.

After 1945, the Sudeten Germans were expelled from Bohemia and Moravia. The bulk of the much smaller German minority was also expelled from Slovakia. A large number of Hungarians were also driven out of Slovakia, but this aspect of post-war "ethnic cleansing" was carried out much less thoroughly. A population of several hundred thousand Magyars remained in their traditional homes on Slovak soil, especially in the south along the Danube where they formed the majority in many individual towns and villages.

Following the Warsaw Pact invasion in August, 1968, the pro-Soviet Husak regime tried to bolster its

support in Slovakia by emphasising the CSSR's federal nature. Despite its theoretical equality with Prague and the presence of a Slovak Communist, Gustav Husak in the Hrad in Prague, in practice Slovakia did not benefit from "normalisation" except in the perverse sense that many uneconomic and ill-thought-out projects were started on Slovak territory. It is doubtful if the "divide and rule" tactics of the Husak regime did anything to improve the lives of ordinary Slovaks. In fact, the combination of forced heavy industrialisation and Soviet-style urban modernization in the 1970s and 1980s have left post- communist Slovakia were a more difficult legacy than the Czech two-thirds of Czechoslovakia.

Although the most famous dissidents were to be found in Prague before the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, Slovakia did have its own anti-Communist groups. Some were composed of former reform communists, like Miroslav Kusy, expelled from the Party and imprisoned after 1968. Others were focussed around either classic liberal ideas or Catholic religious circles, like the one led by Jan Carnogursky. One of the last major events of the old regime was its arrest and trial of Kusy and Carnogursky in the summer and autumn of 1989. Carnogursky's release from prison marked the collapse of the Communist Party's authority in Slovakia.

The post-revolutionary failure to establish a mutually acceptable relationship between Prague and Bratislava reflected the problems that even East-Central Europe's most exemplary democracy had in dealing with nationalism. Undoubtedly, many Slovaks felt slighted by the Czechs. Whether real or imagined, these snubs promoted the Slovak feeling that only greater self- assertiveness could liberate them from their status as country cousins condescended to by Prague. How far such feelings came to mean that most Slovaks really wanted independence may however be doubted. Opinion polls in the run up to 1st January, 1993, suggested that a majority of Slovaks (and Czechs) did not support the separation of Czechoslovakia.

Many dark predictions were made about the fate of both republics after the break-up. It was feared that rows would erupt over the division of their spoils and over border disputes and immigration. In fact, the split has gone remarkably smoothly. A threatening border dispute was defused in July 1993 when Klaus and Meciar agreed to maintain border controls only for citizens from third countries. Relations have been harmonious. Last year Klaus refused to help Jozsef Antall block Slovakia's entry to the Council of Europe and Slovakia supported enthusiastically the Czech Republic's attempt to gain a seat on the UN Security Council. It is also noticeable that official comments were fair and objective following the recent elections.

Of course, at the end of the day Vaclav Klaus was an even more enthusiastic proponent of the federation's demise than Meciar. While he is in power nothing will be done by Prague to disturb the status quo. However, there are, no doubt, those who would like to see closer contacts in the future. On the 23rd June, 1994, Slovak premier, Josef Moravcik, said that the division of Czechoslovakia was "only temporary" and that by 2000 when both countries should have joined the EU they would have "the closest possible contacts". Coupon privatization, the outgoing government's favoured model for privatization, would certainly tie the two countries closer together as many of the larger funds operate in both Prague and Bratislava.

VLADIMIR MECIAR

In the eyes of most people Slovak politics is about only one issue: Vladimir Meciar, for or against? Mr Meciar is undoubtedly the dominant personality in Slovak politics. Neither his predecessor as Prime Minister, Jan Carnogursky, nor his would-be nemesis, President, Michal Kovac, remotely match his charismatic hold as the focus of political debate. Meciar's brief successor as premier, Josef Moravcik, is also bland by comparison.

The basic facts of Meciar's biography are: born in 1942 in Zvolen, Central Slovakia, he worked as a regional administrator and then rose to a senior position in the government's bureau of audit having studied along the way in Moscow. But after protesting against the clamp-down of the Prague Spring in 1968 he was expelled from the Communist Party during the period of "normalisation".

After this he studied law in the evenings at Comenius University before becoming the legal advisor for a glass factory, SKLOOBAL, near Trencin, where he worked until 1989. Meciar re-entered politics after the Velvet Revolution as a leading figure in VONS (Public Against Violence), the Slovak equivalent of the Czech Civic Forum. This group contained many former dissidents and reformers.

In January, 1990, Meciar was appointed Minister of the Interior in the new Slovak government. Six months later he became prime minister. Although he fell from power in 1991 Meciar's new party HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) won elections in June 1992 and he returned to power as prime minister of Slovakia. With the split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia at the end of that year Meciar became the first prime minister of the newly independent Slovakia. However, he was again removed from power when senior members of his party in the government defected in February, 1994, and voted him out of office on 14th March. For the second time Meciar's party won the largest share of the votes in the parliamentary elections held in Slovakia in September 1994.

However, the bare facts of Meciar's biography do not do justice to the phenomenon of the man himself. There was little reaction to his return to politics in 1990. But when it became apparent that the federation might collapse and that Meciar was pursuing a nationalist agenda criticism of him began to grow. (It is worth recalling that at this time the leader of the Christian Democrats and prime minister of Slovakia, Jan Carnogursky was labelled as a dangerous nationalist due, mainly, to his father's participation in the fascist government of Monsignor Josef Tiso). But Carnogursky's shortcomings paled into insignificance when allegations began to be circulate about Meciar's past.

In February 1992, two Prague based newspapers Mlada Fronta Dnes and Respekt¹ published articles alleging that in 1990 Meciar had arranged for secret police headquarters in Trencin (an area with which he was closely connected) to be raided and for documents to be seized which proved not only Meciar's complicity with the old regime but also the involvement of others close to the Ministry of the Interior. The authors included Radio Free Europe's correspondent in Bratislava, Milan Zitny.

These allegations were made by StB operatives and employees of the Ministry of the Interior; there was no written evidence or independent confirmation and it is widely accepted that they have never been adequately proved. However, Meciar's reputation with the media and within intellectual circles was irredeemably damaged. He sued for libel in Prague and although he won his case in the lower court, it was overturned on appeal.

Other "victims of normalisation" disputed the reliability of the records of the StB and found more sympathy. Meciar's low profile in dissident circles was a disadvantage. Accusations made around the same time that Jan Kavan, a Czech dissident living in Britain, had collaborated with the Communist era security services were vigorously rejected by high profile writers and academics in the West even though the case against Kavan was apparently more damning, being illustrated by material in StB files and video-recordings.

His alleged collaboration with the previous regime and support for an independent state meant that from this time Meciar was labelled 'red-brown' _ the most damning charge for a politician in the East. It was widely assumed that his political career was over.

But in the June elections of 1992, the last for the Czechoslovak Federal Parliament and Assembly, Meciar and his party came first with 38% of the vote and 74 seats in the Slovak National Council. The campaign against him had not worked. While alarm bells were ringing in European foreign offices and

among informed opinion the Slovak electorate remained unconvinced.

Both Prague and Bratislava support a contingent of foreign, mainly American, journalists writing for various English-language magazines and newspapers. These people went on the offensive after the June elections producing a steady stream of anti-Meciar invective: dictatorship, censorship of the press, financial sleaze, racism were just a few of the allegations made. Much of the evidence for this was hearsay and denied by Meciar and those in his party. Although other politicians in Slovakia (and the Czech Republic) including critics and rivals of Meciar have reputations as adulterers or womanizers, only in his case has the English-language press made it an issue. His other shortcoming, his government's de facto suspension of the Federation's Lustration law, would have earned praise in the same quarters had it been the work of anyone other than Meciar. As time went on accusations of the kind made by the old KGB emerged: Meciar was alleged to be 'a lunatic' and a 'psychopath'.²

Whatever the truth of the matter, two things are certain. One is that the negative publicity did not just hurt Meciar. It also presented Slovakia in an extremely bad light to the rest of the world. The extreme nature of the charges and the failure of some of the dire predictions to come true are worth reflecting on. Civil unrest and street violence were forecast as early as 1992. A rise in inflation was taken for granted, but in fact, it fell. Meciar's unpopularity and the inevitability of his losing the election were taken for granted. After 1st October, wilder scenarios were painted to the observers, including tanks on the streets!

The second point is that the bad publicity seems to be counter-productive. Whether rightly or wrongly, many ordinary Slovaks do not believe any or all of it. Particularly, foreign criticism seems to have cemented support for Meciar rather than to have undermined it.

THE PRESIDENT

The role of president of the Slovak Republic is defined in Chapter 6 of the Slovak Constitution.

The president is elected by the National Council for a 5 year term. A candidate needs a three-fifths majority of all deputies to be elected. The functions of the president are largely formalities although they cover a wide area from appointing ambassadors to granting amnesties and commuting sentences. Nevertheless, the fact that the office of president is a parliamentary appointment implies that the office is circumscribed. Presidents who enjoy wide executive power, as in Russia, France or the United States, are usually directly elected.

Michal Kovac, a founder member of the HZDS, was not the first choice for president after the parliamentary elections in 1992. However, Meciar's party failed to get the sufficient 3/5 majority for his first choice, Roman Kovac (no relation). Kovac had been expelled from the Communist Party after the events of the Prague Spring in 1968 but subsequently worked abroad both in Cuba and Great Britain.

During the course of 1993 Kovac's relations with Prime Minister Meciar deteriorated and towards the end of the year he was criticizing him openly. On 9th March, as Meciar's government was about to fall Kovac accused Meciar of trying to manipulate him into supporting policies that would benefit HZDS both politically and financially. He also promised to dismiss Ivan Lexa, Meciar's much-criticized minister of privatization.

This situation was, to say the least, unseemly for a modern constitutional state. On the one hand, critics of Meciar supported Kovac's interventions portraying the president as a bulwark of democracy fighting off attempts to impose a dictatorship. The alternative view was that in expressing his personal

feelings about the government of the day Kovac was exceeding his constitutional authority. One thing is certain: attempts to promote Kovac as a 'popular' figure have not succeeded. The president is lampooned as a slow, inarticulate fellow with little charisma. Even opinion polls that veered on the cautious towards the end of the election campaign gave him a low c. 16% rating.

Kovac even managed to overstep his constitutional mandate during the election campaign itself calling for voters to reject Meciar at a rally in Eastern Slovakia. Public speeches on official occasions were thinly disguised criticisms of the ex-prime minister calling for 'co-operation' rather than 'confrontation', etc.

During the election campaign Meciar called for a change in the constitution to allow the president to be directly elected. If not, he must remain a figure-head. It is said that Meciar has his eyes on the job as the best way of seizing power. However, even some of Meciar's fiercest critics like Peter Schütz, editor of the East Slovak paper Domino, dismiss the idea of a putsch or unconstitutional seizure of power. He thinks there are sufficient guarantees in the Slovak Constitution to prevent a coup d'etat as well as lack of support from such key areas as the army.³ It is certainly true to say that the personal antagonisms that developed have probably strained the relationship between the two men to breaking point. However, unless Kovac resigns voluntarily, it may be difficult to remove him by a vote of 3/5 of parliamentary deputies, though Meciar is supposed to have made voting for such a measure a requirement for any putative coalition partner.

It is worth pointing out that in a radio interview on 31st August, prime minister Moravcik said that he too was in favour of increasing the powers of the Slovak president. It is not necessarily an alien idea to other coalition partners either, though Camogursky of the Christian Democrats has already refused to enter a coalition with Meciar on this condition. However, neither the SNP nor elements in the SDL would be averse to meeting those conditions. L'uptak's party too appears ready to join a coalition with the HZDS.

SLOVAK ECONOMY

Economic questions were central to the general election campaign. Debates about privatisation went hand in hand with fears of unemployment and hopes for a brighter economic future. With the exception of Luptak's Workers' Party, all the main parties said that they favoured some sort of privatisation, but could not agree on its model. Some wanted to follow the Czech model of voucher privatisation (also favoured by many foreign experts and consultants), which was broadly the line pursued by the Moravcik government. Meciar, however, criticised the government's concentration on the voucher method.

In practice many Slovak enterprises had been privatised directly through the sale of state enterprises and their assets directly to private bidders. Meciar was criticised for rushing through a number of sales immediately before his fall from office, but after it had become clear that his HZDS had lost its majority in parliament. However, his successors also initiated the direct sale of some state assets in the run-up to the elections at the end of September and carried through more after their defeat but before negotiations over a new coalition had been completed.

Allegations about the dubious nature of the sources of domestic capital used in these privatisations have been a running sore in Slovak politics (as elsewhere in the post-Communist world). In addition to the party political wrangle for seats at the end of September, 1994, President Kovac had been reluctantly forced to agree to the holding of a referendum a few weeks later which would oblige parliament to pass a law clarifying the sources of cash used for the purchase of privatised assets.^{3a}

Meciar has voiced his doubts about voucher privatisation. Although this method is probably the most widely promoted method of privatisation in the post-Communist countries, and has been particularly associated with the Czech republic.

Problems with some of the Czech funds, like Kozeny's Harvard Investments combined with the lack of transparency about their ownership and real control makes many Slovaks suspicious of the voucher method. Their lack of experience with even the most basic financial instruments and methods compounds this problem.

From 5th September, Slovak citizens were supposed to be able to obtain a voucher-book which would enable them to obtain shares in specific enterprises from January onwards. Unfortunately, the Moravcik government failed to complete an inventory of such companies before the general elections and it now seems unlikely that the voucher privatisation process will go ahead in this form.

Unlike the Czech Republic, the banking sector in Slovakia is not highly developed and this means that a large number of small finance houses and funds have sprung up hoping to take advantage of voucher privatisation. Operating out of one-room offices and backrooms these funds do not exude the air of stability or expertise and probity which might encourage confidence.

In the meantime, many Slovak enterprises have become further indebted and only continue in business because of soft loans from the state or because other state enterprises do not press them for overdue payments. The IMF has repeatedly pressed Slovakia to reduce its budget deficit as a way of fighting inflation and encouraging privatisation. However despite the country's reputation as a slow-coach in the reform train, Slovakia's economic statistics are by no means the worst in regional comparison.

Around the time of Meciar's fall, the Slovak economy began to show signs of recovery _ to the surprise of many observers. After falling for four years by almost 25%, Slovakia's domestic product began to increase again in the first quarter of 1994. It rose 4.4% compared with the first quarter of 1993. Industrial production rose even more sharply (by 5.9%). Exports rose 25% in the same period.

However, construction and agriculture remained depressed. Construction fell by 11.3% compared with 1993. Unemployment too remained at around 14%.

The growth in exports, including to the Czech Republic, plus some foreign credits, stabilised the value of the Slovak Crown. The State Bank has been able to build up its hard currency reserves since the turn of the year.

The budget deficit led economists and foreign experts to call for measures to boost the tax revenue and cut state spending. One of the most important measures was a reform of indirect taxes. The introduction of VAT at 10% by the Meciar government, however, countered other anti-inflationary policies continued and in some cases strengthened by his successors after March, 1994, and so inflation remained high at 13.5% in July, 1994. Apart from the Czech Republic, however, it is worth noting that inflation in Slovakia remains relatively low in regional comparison. In 1993, Slovak inflation ran at 23%. This was higher than Czech inflation at 20%, but similar to Hungary's 22% and markedly lower than Poland's 35%, though both these countries have better "pro-reform" reputations.

Even if the Moravcik government could claim some of the credit for the economic upturn, its brief tenure in office could hardly explain the turnaround by itself especially as an important ingredient in most economic upturns, business confidence, had been lacking if only abroad. The press and political onslaught on Meciar's government had undoubtedly helped to discourage foreign investment and to give the impression that Slovakia was politically unstable.

Overall, the economy of Slovakia since the break-up of the Czechoslovak federation at the start of 1993 cannot be said to have performed down to expectations. Despite the loss of subsidies from Prague and the continuation of state or collective ownership in many branches, the Slovak crown, for instance, has only fallen a little over 10% against its Czech cousin. Of course, many analysts would argue that Vaclav Klaus has privatised more in word than deed and that the continuing subsidy of much domestic expenditure by the Czech state as well as of many factories means that the Czech republic's high reputation for making a rapid transition to capitalism by comparison with the Slovaks is exaggerated or even unfounded.

Since foreign investors are influenced as much by reputation as concrete facts (which may be hard to come by), Slovakia has suffered from a low level of hard currency investment. By the end of 1993, only about US\$ 366 million had been invested, a paltry 4% of the total of foreign investment in the Visegrad Four, despite the fact that Slovakia's economic statistics were by no means the worst in every sphere. Meciar's negative reputation and the fostering of it by his opponents in the media must have had the effect of diverting potential investors to Prague or Budapest from Bratislava.

HUNGARIAN MINORITY IN SLOVAKIA

BACKGROUND

One of the major problems facing the new Slovak state was the relationship with its large Hungarian minority. The historical background to this problem has not made the position of the host country or minority easy: Hungary ruled Slovakia for a thousand years until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 drastically reduced the size of Hungary itself leaving sizeable minorities in Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia.

The present Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia was the result of this agreement. But there were two more territorial shifts: In 1938 in the provisions of the First Vienna Award a portion of southern

Slovakia was transferred to Hungary until it was returned to Slovakia at the end of the war. The Benes government not only branded the Sudeten Germans but also the Slovak Hungarians as traitors. Following the so-called 'Benes Decrees', there was another population shift from Slovakia to Hungary _ and vice versa. However, a relatively small number left albeit scores of thousands . Those Hungarians remaining in Slovakia were required to make a show of 'loyalty'.

There is general agreement, supported by the last census in 1991 that there are c. 600,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia mainly on the northern bank of the Danube in the south of the country. Some Hungarian politicians put the figure higher - around 700,000 but there is no hard evidence for this.

However, the Hungarians still do not have territorial exclusivity in this region. while some towns have a majority of Hungarians (Komarno 72.27% and Dunajska Streda 87.26% as do many villages) other centres of population are mixed and there are also villages populated exclusively by Slovaks . Added to which, there has, naturally, been much intermarriage. Bilingualism is the norm.

During the Communist period the minorities had no active political representation. However, in 1968 the Slovaks as well as the Czechs were recognised as a state-building nation along strictly federal lines and the legal status of the minorities was made explicit in Constitutional Law No.144 (1968) but there were no concrete rules for the actual implementation of minority rights. Whatever the constitutional guarantees or lack of them, little could be done anyway at this time as the political scene was totally under the domination of the Communist Party.

The Hungarians were allowed to operate a cultural organization, CSEMOK, and there were Hungarian language schools and state broadcasting quotas as was the case in all Communist countries. But in the late 1970s under the leadership of Miklos Duray a signatory of Charter 77 the community became more vocal in its demands. Support also began to be voiced in Budapest itself by writers like Istvan Csurka for the general plight of Hungarian minorities.⁴ By signing the Charter Duray was able to gain wider publicity for the Hungarian minority's cause. Publications abroad of the Charter's activities (like the Palach Press in the UK) reached an even wider audience. In Prague Vaclav Havel himself was said to be particularly concerned with the fate of the Slovak Hungarians.

Although it is now commonplace to regard the Communist period as something of a golden age for minorities it is worth looking back at some of Duray's accusations against the authorities made in the '80s. In 1987 he complained about arson attacks against Hungarian cultural centres in Bratislava. He went on "employees of Hungarian institutions are often subjected to threatening telephone calls, children who converse in Hungarian on public transport are frequently reprovved for this by Slovak adults and young Hungarians have been beaten up and threatened with death only because they are of Hungarian nationality".⁵ Of course, at this time it was impossible to verify these accusations but it is worth pointing out that no allegations of this seriousness have been made by Duray and other Hungarian politicians in Slovakia since.

With the collapse of Communism in 1989 the Hungarians in Slovakia began to coalesce into political movements and parties initially under the umbrella of the Hungarian Independent Initiative. Duray himself formed Együttélés (Co-Existence) which was intended to represent the interests of all minorities in the Czechoslovak Federation, although it has become identified exclusively with the Hungarians. The Hungarian Christian Democratic Party which appealed only to Catholic voters grew out of Hungarian Christian democratic clubs. In 1991 the first exclusively Hungarian party, the Hungarian People's Party was formed and in January 1992 the HII turned itself into the Hungarian Civic Party, a liberal grouping.

In preparation for the 1992 Federal and state elections three of these parties agreed to form a

coalition so as to surmount the 7% threshold for parliamentary representation and gained 14 seats in parliament. The small, moderate Civic Party remained outside the coalition (it joined for the election Sept./Oct. 94) - its participation would have pushed the coalition's requirements for representation up to 10% of the popular vote a figure they feared, rightly, they would not achieve.

While Együttélés and the HCDP have been high profile members of the Hungarian coalition, the Hungarian Peoples Party is more opaque. Rather than identify these parties by normal left/right classification they should be looked at through the prism of their attitude to the minority and their approach to its needs. In this case, Együttélés while being a rightist party in the economic sense (supporting economic reform, privatization etc) is the more extreme in its demands looking to some kind of future regional autonomy for the Hungarian population within Slovakia.

Hungarians supported the continuation of the federation as they regarded it as a better forum for protection of minority rights. The activities of the Slovak National Party (demonstrations, sloganeering etc.) fuelled their fears. Even though full-scale Slovak independence had not been mooted in 1990 Együttélés was critical of the Language Law passed in 1990 by the Slovak parliament which made Slovak the state language. The Slovak National Party had tried to introduce a more restrictive document.

As the date of independence drew near, the Hungarian minority was apprehensive. There was talk of nationalist intolerance _ by this stage neo-Nazi attacks had begun in Germany and there had been several killings of gypsies in the Czech Republic. The minority was particularly wary of the Slovak National Party and its off-shoot, Matica Slovenska a cultural organization that thrived in the pre-war period and had been recently revived.

GABCIKOVO - NAGYMOROS DAM

Added to this was controversy over the Gabčíkovo-Nagymoros dam project which came to a head in the Autumn preceding the break-up of the federation. The dam was a grand scheme designed by Hungarian and Czech engineers which became law under international treaty obligations in 1977. The plan was to divert the Danube along a 35 kilometre canal south of Bratislava to Nagymoros in Hungary.

However, many of the dissident movements in Eastern Europe became ecologically orientated particularly after the Chernobyl disaster. In Hungary itself Green activists formed the Danube Circle the specific purpose of which was to cancel the Hungarian government's side of the Danube Dam agreement. The group attracted widespread support and the Hungarian government backed down in 1989 and cancelled their side of the agreement. It is accepted that the environmental concerns of the Danube Circle helped to bring down Communist rule in Hungary.

However, in the dying days of the Czechoslovak Federation work began on the final stage of the dam on the Slovak side involving the diversion of the river via the canal. Environmentalists objected on grounds, among other things, that the local water table would be disrupted causing hardship to local communities, particularly Hungarians, living in the area.

In December 1992 members of the BHHRG visited the canal at various points and also the vast hydro-electric power station at Gabčíkovo. They talked to local Slovaks and Hungarians about their attitudes to the dam and politicians in Bratislava about the project. Villagers on the Slovak side of the dam had not noticed any lowering of the level of water in their wells - in fact, some said the water table had actually risen since the dam opened. On inspection both the river and canal showed swelling waters unlike the proto_Aral Sea that had been predicted by some environmentalists. Nevertheless, in the past two years there have been complaints from Hungarian farmers that the water table has

dropped. It is worth pointing out that a recent article in the British magazine New Scientist⁶ claimed that the dam had been an environmental success on the Slovak side reviving long lost wetlands by actually raising the water table.

More worrying from a human rights perspective was the fate of three villages stranded between the canal and the Danube itself _ Vojka, Bodiky and Babrohosti. In December 1992 the mayor of Vojka, Laszlo Nagy, told our group that villagers were unhappy with various aspects of the dam's construction not least the need to travel an extra 50 k. to Bratislava where many people worked. A ferry service operated over the dam but the villagers wanted, quite reasonably, a bridge to cut their journey. However, they all said that the damage had been done a long time before and that activities like fishing, for instance, had ceased years before. They did voice fears for their security. It is easy to see looking at the huge raised bank of the dam how any breach of the bank or serious leakage could cause a local ecological disaster. When these points were put to Jan Carnogursky (CDM) whose brother was a leading engineer of the project he dismissed them rather peremptorily saying that such fears were unfounded.

Since then much less has been heard of the dam. The New Scientist article quotes the people of Vojka as now being content with the situation. People in Bodiky seemed to be resigned to the dam. It is even conceivable that the Hungarians will move to complete their part of the agreement soon.

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Thornberry "...it may not be practicable in terms of efficiency and cost to designate a plurality of languages as "official" in states where many languages are spoken and resources are limited""In the linguistic context, it must not be forgotten that in states struggling to build a national identity from heterogeneous elements, the selection of an official language may be an important symbol and a practical necessity...."⁷

In October 1990 the Slovak National Council passed the Language Law making Slovak the state language but allowing the use of other languages by state officials and citizens where the minority made up 20% of the population. Czech could be used in any official business in the republic. Együttélés strongly condemned the law, basically, because it failed to set down positive rights about the use of minority languages. However, Art. 34 of the Slovak constitution affirms the right of minorities to use their own language in educational and cultural spheres (subject to the conditions set out in the law). Együttélés complained that these provisions were not strong enough and that they opened the way for minority political organizations to be banned.

These criticisms and the concomitant unease over the law led Hungarian politicians, particularly Duray, to demand cultural and educational autonomy for Hungarian regions. But ultimately he and his party want regional i.e. political autonomy in the south of Slovakia something no Slovak politician of any party will countenance.

MINORITY RELATIONS UNDER MECIAR

During the first year of Slovak independence relations between Hungarian politicians and Meciar's government deteriorated. Arguments developed over the need for Hungarian women to append the Slav suffix 'ova' to their names and the use of Hungarian language on village signs. However, after much deliberation and many fact-finding missions Slovakia (with Hungary abstaining) was admitted into the Council of Europe in December 1993.

But in January 1994 3000 Hungarians including representatives of political parties and 100 local officials gathered in Komarno to discuss territorial autonomy. Apart from the Meciar government's refusal to pass legislation to secure the use of Hungarian names they also objected to proposed local government boundaries which they claim would bifurcate their communities - they asked for regional authorities based on ethnic principles.

Conducted at this level, talk of regional autonomy unites all Slovakian parties in opposition. It cannot be said that Hungary itself has supported the idea although Gyula Horn was reported as saying on December 19, 1993 that Hungarians living in Slovakia had "a right to self-rule, in areas where they are in the majority". This was before Horn's Socialist Party triumphed in the May 1994 elections since which he has been more subdued.

Despite the rhetoric, participants at the Komarno meeting backed off from pursuing a more radical agenda. However, disputes continued afterwards over the names issue. The Slovak authorities were accused of removing some Hungarian village name signs under a ruling by Transport Minister Roman Hofbauer. After the Meciar government fell in March this year two laws were hastily passed guaranteeing the rights of Hungarian women not to use the 'ova' and protecting the right to use their village names.

COMMENTS

As stated earlier, members of the BHRG travelled through the Hungarian region of southern Slovakia in 1992 and talked to local people and officials about some of the fears voiced by Hungarian minority politicians. Even then, a year before the matter came to a head, accusations had been levelled against the Slovak authorities about the removal of village names. We saw no evidence of this. In most places with a mixed population there were two signs in Slovak and Hungarian clearly visible.

The mayor of Sturovo, Jan Oravec, (an ethnic Slovak more comfortable speaking Hungarian!) made certain interesting observations. Even then, before Slovak independence he reported that he had been visited by 15 human rights organizations investigating the Hungarian minority's situation. He complained about local politicians' obsession with the minutiae of language use in the region. "They talk about it for hours and then pass the budget in 5 minutes" he said. He wanted the bridge over the Danube connecting Sturovo with Esztergom on the Hungarian side to be rebuilt (it had been destroyed in the war) but he sensed that the local Hungarian politicians were not interested in concrete projects like this. Nearly two years later the bridge has still not been repaired even though the Slovak government has offered half the money. Basically, the mayor felt that not enough was being done by local representatives to address serious economic problems in the region.

Journalists, both Slovak and foreign, also contributed to the growing unease about Slovakia's relations with the ethnic Hungarian minority by portraying the region as unstable and likely to erupt into violence. One such predicted that war would break out between Hungary and Slovakia before the next parliamentary elections (just held, autumn 1994). Such reports contributed to fears abroad that another Bosnia might be in the making.⁸ Much of this scare-raising was part of a general climate of hostility between the press and the Meciar government.

Meciar himself was regularly portrayed as confrontational as was his government in general. Quotations and views were attributed to him, often of dubious veracity. Undoubtedly, clumsy and provocative things were said which in the prevailing atmosphere of hostility to his government were less than tactful. But no action of a serious nature was taken against the Hungarian community and the Council of Europe with a proviso about the names, failed to reveal serious breaches of human rights in the region before admitting Slovakia to membership.

On three visits to the region in the past two years we have seen no evidence of tension between the

Slovak and Hungarian populations any hostility that does exist is political - we heard this in Kosice as well as the more densely populated Hungarian areas in the south. All Hungarians speak Slovak and (unlike in Romania) do not mind doing so. The politicians say that the Hungarians lack schools and teachers, but we found no particular dissatisfaction on this score when we talked to local Hungarians about the educational system. Duray complains about the small amount of time provided for Hungarian language programmes on Slovak television but most Hungarians are able to watch Budapest TV anyway and seem to be happy to do so. It was pointed out to us, quite forcefully, that minority rights in Slovakia were better protected than in many other parts of Europe.

However, this is not to say that the Hungarian minority welcomes the prospect of another Meciar government - but neither do they fear it in any meaningful sense. Tensions have lowered since Moravcik and co. came to power and the names issue was settled. The election of a socialist government in Budapest has also lowered the temperature. But several points should be born in mind.

HUNGARY

Many Hungarians, however they might dissemble, see the eventual restoration of their kingdom as a natural development. While not actively promoting such a confrontational policy they regard certain EU initiatives, e.g. increased regionalism, as a way to reincorporate these areas. Their approach to countries like Romania and Slovakia is one of barely concealed contempt - that of a former seat of empire to its colonies. Much of this is ignored in the West where Hungarians can expect to receive a good press due partly to their large and active diasporas and the high profile achieved by such Hungarians as George Soros. It is interesting to note that while Mr. Soros has made admirable financial contributions to high-level academic and media groups in both Hungary and Slovakia no funds have been directed towards bettering the condition of the ground of the Hungarian minority.

While he was prime minister Jozsef Antall often gave the impression that Hungary was a nation of 15m. people, including the 5m. living beyond Hungary's borders. Many Hungarians seem to be imbued with their own superiority. Duray has said that Hungarians are the only real democrats in Slovakia. Publications in Hungary laud that country's minority policies - the Europa Institute in Budapest notes that Slovak groups in Hungary "have been unable to rally the minority living in various stages of assimilation, which has made irreversible advances by now...".⁹ It is difficult to imagine any Hungarian allowing such comments about assimilation of its own minorities abroad to go unchallenged. Other commentators regard the Hungarians as the only group in Slovakia committed to the market economy - Slovaks, by definition, are regarded as big-spending (backward) socialists.

PROSPECTS

The hostility to Meciar is such that the temperature between Hungarians and the government in Bratislava could be raised again, probably over the question of regional autonomy.

This solution to the alleged disadvantages suffered by Hungarians living in southern Slovakia is unrealistic because:

(i) The region is not ethnically 'pure'. Even taking into account their large Hungarian populations most of the region's towns have a majority Slovak population. An autonomous Hungarian region would automatically create another minority - the Slovaks who would no doubt begin to demand a whole series of rights for themselves within the region. There is a limit to how much a small, poor country embarking on structural and economic reform can afford such tinkering with its civic and social structures.

(ii) examples of successful autonomous regions elsewhere are often produced as evidence that such

arrangements can work e.g. Catalonia. However, Catalonia is sui generis a Spanish region it has no claims on the host country as such nor has it connections with a larger Catalonia abroad. The history of this region and the attitudes described above are so palpable that any move towards autonomy should be rejected as destabilizing for the region as a whole. It is sad to see ordinary Hungarians who live in peace with their Slovak neighbours drawn inexorably along this dangerous road.

THE MEDIA

Television

Meciar's government seemed to be locked in a permanent battle with the press during its 20 months in office. Not only did local journalists make serious criticisms about interference with the freedom of the press and broadcast media in Slovakia, foreign reporters were also loud in their complaints.

After the velvet revolution radio and television in Czechoslovakia were put under the supervision of independent, non-partisan boards. In 1990 it was agreed that separate administrative bodies would be set up for Czech and Slovak TV. There was to be one channel for the federation and a second channel for each country. In May 1991 Slovakia passed two media laws one governing radio the other television. They were to be given their own budgets and administration was to be divided among a board, an advisory committee and a director general.

Members of the TV board were to be selected from each party represented in the National Council. The Slovak government and advisory committee could each appoint three members and 4 more would be selected by the director. The Advisory Committee would contain representatives of political parties not in the National Council, religious communities trade unions and other groups. The director was to be nominated by the Board and approved by the Slovak National Council. In May 1992 the Slovak National Council passed a law to establish another board to oversee radio and TV and ensure objectivity. Its members would be named by the National Council.

In most parts of the ex-Soviet Empire the media was staffed by employees chosen for their loyalty to the Communist Party. Democratization depended upon either a change in their approach to journalistic work or the introduction of new blood. How this was to be achieved was often controversial, as it became an issue in current politics. The government in Hungary, for instance, conducted a long battle with what many regarded as an unreconstructed media, but only tried to purge its critics very late in the day, immediately prior to the parliamentary elections in May 1994.

In Czechoslovakia many media folk, while not expressing hardline Communist views any more certainly adopted what was the 'politically correct', left/liberal line when it came to the federation: they felt strongly that it should be maintained. It is hardly surprising that Meciar with his absence of ties to the former media as well as to the old dissident networks and the underground press should have been anathema to them. Shortly after the elections in June 1992 it was announced that Meciar would address the nation regularly on TV. This proposal immediately became the focus of intense controversy. The chief producer of Slovak TV refused to allow this. Meciar took the matter to court and won. It was accepted that President Havel gave a weekly chat from his residence in Lány though it was technically described as an 'interview' by those who opposed Meciar's appearances.

In the following months there were more changes in the running of television. New rules were adopted for electing the board in September 1992. 9 members were to be elected solely by the National Council for 6 years. The board was to recommend a director general and parliament would approve (or not) the selection. When a new board was elected in October 1992 it was said that most of its members were connected with HZDS and 4 had been identified by an independent commission as former state security collaborators.

While all this was going on the Slovak government also revoked a licence for a group of entrepreneurs to privatize Slovakia's third television station TA3. One of the leading figures involved in this consortium was Peter Huncik, a Hungarian, active in minority politics as well as an outspoken critic of Meciar.

Newspapers

All national newspapers in Slovakia are printed by the state printing house, Danubiaprint. In a penultimate session of the parliament in 1992 Danubiaprint was sold to a private businessman. However, the contract was annulled in July by the new government on the grounds that a state monopoly was being replaced by a private one. The distribution of newspapers is in the hands of the state post office as was (and still is) the case in most former Communist countries. However, in towns and cities papers are widely available from shops and newsstands.

Criticism then followed the sacking of a number of journalists from the newspaper Smena including the editor Karel Jezik. The newspaper was not closed down, despite criticisms of its policies and these journalists set up a new paper Sme within days of departing from their former employment. Sme has appeared without interruption ever since and has a circulation of 30,000. Other papers that came under fire at this time was the Kosice daily Slovenske Vychod. It was removed from its offices but found accommodation elsewhere where it still continues to print. In January 1994 a new paper critical of the Meciar government appeared in Kosice called Domino. It has appeared without interference since.

There was undoubtedly a serious clash of personalities between foreign journalists, and the Minister of Culture, Dusan Slobodnik, and his deputy Roman Zelenay. Slobodnik described by one American journalist as "someone you'd laugh at if he weren't in such a powerful position"¹⁰ is a Shakespeare scholar who speaks 7 languages but who seemed to arouse the press to paroxysms of fury. It was the same with Zelenay who went so far as to accuse foreign journalists of taking bribes to defame the Slovak government. In December last year supposedly after revealing he had information about ex-Communist Party finances he died when his car collided with a lorry near the Czech border.

Undoubtedly both Slobodnik and Zelenay over-responded to unfavourable criticism. In the West politicians have learned to be thick-skinned regarding criticism as the oxygen of democracy. But we should not forget that calls regularly come in Great Britain for privacy laws to prevent MP's private lives being discussed in the media. The French have such a law already. Neither should we forget that, for better or worse, in 1992-3 Slovakia was a new country badly in need of international respectability after years of Communism as well as confidence from foreign investors. Headlines such as "Will we become a one-party state again?" (Smena) were bound to cause anxiety. The Slovak government was also angered by rumours they strenuously denied that they were about to set up an Orwellian 'Ministry of Information'. For politicians to appeal for objectivity from reporters is not altogether surprising in these circumstances - in the new South Africa Thabo Mbeki has recently made a similar appeal to the press.

The most virulent attacks came from foreign journalists mostly Americans working for two Prague newspapers, Prognosis and The Prague Post. Although none of these people would be household names in the West their views are sought by visiting journalists and businessmen arriving in a country where few know the language. In a series of articles attacking Meciar as well as Slobodnik and Zelenay the accuracy of their reporting can perhaps be best judged by the inaccuracy of their predictions. In February, 1994, Prognosis was saying that "Meciar is without doubt the most openly mocked human being in Bratislava, if not throughout Slovakia".¹¹ It is little wonder that the diplomatic community as well as most other observers predicted that even if Meciar did well in the forthcoming elections he would not gain enough support to govern again.

That these journalists regarded them as peasants and bumpkins bent on bringing a dictator to power is well known to ordinary Slovaks. It is no doubt one of the contributory factors that leads them to vote for Meciar again and again. It is a kind of Waldheim Effect: the more foreigners attack him, the more his core support is strengthened in its resolve to vote for him.

With Meciar's party victorious in the recent elections the local foreign language press has sunk to new depths. To quote a recent edition of Prognosis: "one hears a surprising number of jokes about killing all the old people, or at least preventing them from voting. "Slovaks are stupid" one hears often in Bratislava" then, he goes on "Meciar's voters are older [than they were in 1992]", ex-HZDS member, Milan Knazko, said with a wicked chuckle. "In a year there won't be so many of them around. Just kidding-but not really". And there is more: "the geriatric set has yet to lose an electoral battle since 1990"... "Sure enough Slovak TV was full of footage showing octogenarian after octogenarian limping slowly into the polling booth."¹²

This kind of 'reporting' is offensive. It is racist. It is also cruel and abusive to the old and the lame. Neither is it accurate. It is more reminiscent of the scurrilous Soviet magazine Krokodil than of the "fact-checking" US media. The "young American" media ghetto in Bratislava is cut off from the full spectrum of Slovak opinion and makes little effort to understand what it finds alien.

In fact, despite all the rhetoric the press in Slovakia is remarkably varied and free. During Meciar's time in power at least two new anti-Meciar newspapers opened (Sme and Domino) while Koridor a paper that openly supported him shut down through lack of funds. It is widely agreed that Slovenska Republika was the only daily paper supporting HZDS in the elections, a fact which other parties and anti-Meciar journalists welcomed as a sign that his message would not be getting across to the public as in the past. Smena supports the PDL, Sme and Domino (loosely, the Democratic Party) and Slovenske Vychod the Democratic Union.

Although it was widely alleged (probably accurately) by his critics that Slovenska Republicka was not commercially viable and must have been subsidised by some rich supporter(s), the same is probably true of all the Slovak press. Ownership and subsidy remain obscure in all cases and questions about them were generally fended off with vague answers, if at all.

As for the television, some small private stations have now started - there are several in Eastern Slovakia. For all the supposed interference of HZDS with Slovak Television, a satirical programme about Meciar "Evenings with Milan Markovic" appeared regularly in 1993 This is not to say Slovak Television is particularly good. Its coverage of the election was lamentable: it gave very little information or analysis of the results. Teletext news was sometimes a day out of date. A pantomimic comedy was broadcast for much of Saturday afternoon after the polls had closed and when Austrian television was already showing provisional results! However, it was generally agreed that it had behaved properly in following the rules on election broadcasts and giving each party equal broadcast time.

Charges were made by several people that Slovak TV was still in the hands of Meciar's people. When Meciar was unable to vote because his name was not on the electoral register it was suggested that this was a 'stunt' to get publicity. The SDL leader, Peter Weiss, was unable to vote initially for the same reasons. We cannot comment on the truth or otherwise of these allegations. We heard of no other examples of media manipulation by Meciar. The only dubious piece of pre-election programming we saw was a 'fireside chat' given by Josef Moravcik, the outgoing prime minister, on the eve of election-day. As Moravcik was asking the electorate to vote for continuity and economic reform this was akin to a campaign speech slipped in by sleight of hand when campaigning was legally deemed to have ended.

EDUCATION: TRNAVA UNIVERSITY

In late 1992 a battle developed between the Slovak Ministry of Education and the authorities at a new university that opened earlier in the year at Trnava, north-east of Bratislava.

The University of Trnava was an ancient foundation. Its revival was taken both in Slovakia and abroad as an important commitment to educational independence. A building had been made available in the centre of Trnava an attractive Baroque town but with the inevitable ingredient of bad Communist / Brutalist architecture. The new institution, previously the pedagogical institute for Comenius University, is one such building.

When the Group visited Trnava in December 1992 it was locked in dispute with the then Education Minister Matus Kucera over its bank account. The Ministry had frozen the account citing irregularities. Other complaints were that many members of the university's teaching staff did not have the proper teaching qualifications including the rector, Anton Hajduk. Dr. Hajduk, an astronomer and author of respected works on Soviet cosmonauts (Gagarin and Tereshchikova), was confirmed in office by President Havel while the federation was still in existence.

The dispute fizzled out during 1993 and Trnava was allowed to operate although much of the original enthusiasm shown by local and foreign intellectuals has become somewhat subdued. Like so many other things in Slovakia this project seems to provoke widespread cynicism. It is said that far from being a beachhead for independent university-activity, Trnava is a place where academics from Comenius University come to teach, thereby earning two salaries.

We visited the university and talked to the rector Dr. Hajduk. While not necessarily agreeing with the Slovak authorities certain things worried us:

(i) the new university was structuring its courses on European lines. This meant that a degree course would take 5 to 6 years - a lengthy period that countries like Germany now want to abandon. As the state is expected to fund Trnava we felt that they would be better advised to adopt the British system of 3-year degree courses.

(ii) The lack of self-reliance, so familiar in post- Communist countries was manifest. There were no books anywhere in the university. A library had not been opened and none of the lecture rooms had any reading materials. As the main thrust of Trnava is meant to be the liberal arts this seemed unsatisfactory. When we offered to help them stock a library by providing classic texts from Oxford, we received a fax requesting modish and expensive American textbooks. Basic philosophical texts can be bought cheaply in nearby Vienna. Friends in the West would have provided them free.

BACKGROUND TO THE 1994 ELECTION

Vladimir Meciar was removed from power in 1991 by defections from his HZDS party. The same thing happened again during 1993 and early 1994. By March of this year he accepted that he had lost a workable majority in the parliament and decided to go into opposition.

The first in the series of defections that was to bring down Meciar for a second time took place in the spring of 1993 when Meciar sacked the high-profile Foreign Minister, Milan Knazko. Seven HZDS deputies rallied to him and they formed the Alliance of Democrats within the framework of the party. On the same day, SNP Chairman Ludovit Cernak resigned as economy minister and his party withdrew from its informal coalition arrangement with Meciar. However, these defections did not prove terminal as the SDL and several SNP members kept the government in power.

Other high-profile defections followed including former Privatization Minister, Lubomir Dolgos, and Slovak Ambassador to Austria, Rudolf Filkus. By October, after much bickering a new coalition agreement was signed with the SNP.

But the haemorrhaging did not stop there. On 11th February Deputy Prime Minister, Roman Kovac, and Foreign Minister, Josef Moravcik, lent their support to Knazko's Alternative of Political Realism group but did not resign from the party. It had been known for some time that they were unhappy. On 12th February, the HZDS voted to expel them but despite pressure from Meciar, President Kovac refused to dismiss them from the cabinet. However, on February 24th Moravcik resigned saying he was going to create a new centre party. Meciar himself was on an official visit to China and Thailand. The Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Yevgeny Primakov, was visiting Bratislava at the time and was shown on television with President Kovac during this constitutional crisis _ an unprecedented development.

Unable to muster a majority in the parliament Meciar was voted out of power on March 11th. After yet more wrangling over the next few months, elections were fixed for 30th September and 1st October, 1994. In the meantime Slovakia was to be governed by a 'rainbow' coalition containing both the ex-Communist SDL, and Camogursky's Christian Democrats.

It seems that almost from the moment Meciar came to power attempts were being made to destabilize his government. Already in the summer of 1993, core member parties of the future rainbow coalition met to discuss how to replace Meciar's government and install a new cabinet without fresh elections.¹³

In practice, it was defections by Meciar's coalition partners and members of his own party which were to bring about his loss of a majority. What became the Democratic Union (DU) provided the motley anti-Meciar coalition with a majority.

However, it is probably true to say that Moravcik and co. would have preferred not to defect from the HZDS: they may have calculated that they would muster enough HZDS MPs sympathetic to their point of view to oust Meciar. Thus the government could have continued in power without the need for new elections. Foreign journalists and analysts tended to see Moravcik as a social democrat. Filkus, Knazko and the President, Kovac had all been named by Milan Zitny (of RFE) as the more acceptable face of the HZDS already in 1992.¹⁴

It is a reflection on the low standing of the new Slovak political class that many people are convinced that the defectors were paid large sums of money to bring the government down. In 1993 Meciar himself had accused Cernak (SNP) of demanding money for joining a coalition with the HZDS. Of course, it is impossible to establish the accuracy of such rumours (although one MP is reported to

have let slip drunkenly his price in the parliamentary chamber) but the widespread nature of these allegations did little to promote respect for the newly-established democratic system. In the run-up to this year's elections, Meciar exacted promises of loyalty from HZDS candidates but he failed in his attempts to make it illegal for an MP to remain in parliament once he abandons the party upon whose list he was elected. The possibility must exist that more defections will take place in the future. Whatever their reasons such future changes of allegiance can only add to the low esteem for politicians in Slovakia.

ELECTIONS

18 political parties contested the elections held on 30th Sept - 1st October, 1994 [see Appendix 2]. Many of these parties were coalitions of other groups and parties themselves.

To enter parliament, parties had to pass a threshold of 5% of votes cast. Coalitions of up to three had to overcome a 7% threshold. (Theoretically, a coalition of four or more parties had to pass 10%.) Opinion polls accurately predicted which parties would in fact achieve representation, namely, the HZDS, SDL (Common Choice), SNP, CDM, Hungarian Coalition, DU and L'uptak's Party. However, the polls failed to make more accurate estimates of the results regularly placing the HZDS around 28% of the vote and overestimating support for the SDL at 20%.

Of the parties which failed to reach the threshold for representation only the Democratic Party had any widespread appeal. The Democratic Party comprised defectors from Carnogursky's Christian Democrats. The Party wanted a more radical economic agenda and commitment to joining western structures. They were hostile to Carnogursky's stated view that he wanted Slovakia to be a bridge between East and West. However, yet again we see fissiparous tendencies at work in the reformist parties which cannot help their cause. It is likely that some natural CDM supporters moved towards the new party after Carnogursky went into coalition with the ex- Communist SDL last March.

The Democratic Union, which included most members of the present government arose from the split with the HZDS that occurred last February. It includes prime minister Josef Moravcik, Roman Kovac, Rudolf Filkus and Milan Knazko. It is difficult to see how this party could have built up an active grass-roots level of support in the last six months and it certainly gave the impression of an organization composed of chiefs and few Indians. Serious allegations were even made that the Party had failed to collect the necessary number of signatures for registration in the election _ two HZDS members are pursuing this allegation through the courts. However, it was the grouping most favoured by the West and probably by those people making some headway in the market economy. It is best compared with Russia's Choice the West's favourite party in last December's parliamentary elections in Russia. In both cases these parties turned out to enjoy much less prestige with ordinary Russian and Slovak voters than foreign experts and observers.

The other new party on the political scene was L'uptak's Workers party which was committed to stopping privatization as carried out by the present coalition. This party could very well ally itself with the SDL in the future. However, it did well in its own right and is able theoretically to join a coalition government. It is worth pointing out that both L'uptak's party and the HZDS campaigned actively throughout the campaign. Both visited factories and villages. A leader of the (losing) Democratic Union, Milan Knazko, expressed his contempt for such populist electioneering: "[Meciar] went to every village where they'd never seen a politician before."¹⁵ It is interesting to observe that commentators on the Slovak elections derided such activity as populist (i.e. undesirable) whereas in the West contact with ordinary voters is regarded as the central feature of an election campaign.

Members of our Group visited Slovakia in late August and early September to watch the election campaign get into gear. They travelled through the country from Kosice, Poprad, Martin to Bratislava.

At this time only the HZDS seemed actively preparing for the forthcoming election. Campaign materials and literature were available and offices manned. It was surprising to find young and middle-aged people working for the HZDS as the press reports constantly insisted that only 'babushkas' voted for the party. Neither did we have the impression that the party was merely a vehicle for Mr. Meciar's overweening ambitions. It produced a detailed election manifesto and obviously appealed to people for a variety of legitimate reasons. By refusing to accept the party as a political force in its own right the media only serves to perpetuate the HZDS's popularity.

It was alleged that the HZDS election campaign had been assisted by members of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party. This was denied by both Meciar and other HZDS representatives (the denial was never reported). It is interesting that Berlusconi should have been singled out: Forza Italia is regarded with suspicion by many sections of the media in the West. In fact, before the Berlusconi rumours came to our attention we had been told that HZDS election co-ordinators had been in the USA studying the lessons of the Clinton campaign in 1992!

Campaigning was more visible at street level than in ex- Soviet republics. There were many posters particularly for HZDS, SDL and DU. Only the Meciar posters had been defaced. Slogans like 'To the graveyard' were sprayed over them (seemingly by the same hand) in a wide area of Bratislava.

THE ELECTION PROCEDURES

The Election Law 1992 (as amended for 1994) covers the conduct of elections in Slovakia. A similar system of proportional representation was in operation. Party lists are chosen by voters who then mark 4 candidates of their choice. In Slovakia's case the party lists were on separate pieces of paper (a system the Group saw in Latvia in 1993). In the last elections these lists were posted to peoples' homes but this had been changed and the lists were available in the polling stations itself. Two days were allowed for voting: polls opened from 2.00 p.m. - 10 p.m. Friday and 8.00 p.m. - 2.00 p.m. Saturday. 250 polling stations were opened two hours earlier than this to enable workers to vote. Again, as with Latvia, a small country was allowing two days for voting to take place. For the purpose of the elections Slovakia had been divided into 4 electoral districts. Electoral Commissions were composed of a member for each political party. Local electoral commissions also had a party mix.

The BHHRG sent three observers to the Slovak elections. Christine Stone and Mark Almond observed voting in Nitra, Galanta, Bratislava and surrounding villages on day one of the poll. On Saturday October 1st they went to the heavily populated Hungarian area in the south of the country visiting Samorin, Gabcikovo, Bodiky and several polling stations in Komarno and Dunajska Streda. Alastair Macleod went to Kosice and visited stations both in the town and the surrounding area.

The Group concluded that voting was orderly and proceedings conducted freely and fairly. There was a high turn-out (c.75%) although Mr. Macleod reported that it was lower in the east of the country.

However, we would like to make the following observations about the organizational aspects of the voting system in Slovakia for future reference:

(i) The list of voters seems to have been rather haphazardly produced with people being left off the list. At a meeting with the Central Electoral Commission held on the day before the election we were told that people could vote away from home if they produced their identification cards; their names would be added to the local list. However, no other than Meciar himself found his name absent from the list in his own polling station in Bratislava. Mr. Weiss was also initially unable to vote. Apart from these high-profile cases we came across a handful of other examples. At the end of the first day of voting people not on the electoral list for their own district for some oversight were allowed to vote by presenting identity cards.

(ii) The system of voting by party list when there are 18 parties is complicated enough. It is not made any easier when there are 18 pieces of paper to study. Electoral commissions handed these lists out in a stamped envelope giving the voter a fresh envelope in which to put his or her vote. (spoilt ballots etc.). As we observed with a similar system in Latvia the need to juggle with endless pieces of paper in the polling booth leads to queues forming (we saw the beginnings of this in Nitra. It was 5.30 p.m. and people were coming in to vote after work). When queues form people start voting in public, consulting with one another and making it possible for influence to be peddled. We saw no examples of this in fact.

(iii) Another problem with this method is that people throw away unused ballot papers when they have voted. In the case of Slovakia large brown cardboard boxes had been provided in a conspicuous part of the polling room. However, although obliged by law to dispose of their unused papers, many did not do so and took them away. In some polling stations commission chairmen said that they were happy for people to do this. No doubt most people used them as scrap paper. But in a system of voting that goes on for two days opportunities, theoretically, exist for someone to vote twice especially when a citizen can vote away from home.

(iv) A familiar problem is the failure to adjust satisfactorily the number of ballot papers delivered to a polling station to the number of voters registered there. Most places had received extra ballot papers ranging from 100 (e.g. in Galanta) to 10 in a small village. In Slovakia discrepancies may have been related to the unsatisfactory voters registers.

THE ELECTION AND THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY

Voters in Slovakia may soon weary of elections: they have a national referendum scheduled to take place on 22nd October and local elections in November. For the moment though they seem to have participated in these elections with knowledge and enthusiasm even if the outcome was not to the liking of the outside world.

However, we should add that we did have certain reservations about the Hungarian minority's participation. In one polling station in Komarno we were treated with suspicion and hostility. Certain basic items of information crucial to the observers mission was withheld from us (e.g. the number of people who had voted at the time of our visit) and we were more or less 'shown the door'. Later, officials at another polling station in Dunajska Streda refused to let us observe the start of the count even though the rules governing election observers allowed this. Both these towns have majority Hungarian populations. Adjacent to the polling room in Dunajska Streda No.6 was an office with its door ajar showing a large election poster for the Hungarian Coalition.

The problem seems to be that the Hungarian minority are loyal to their own politicians but, if the truth was known, probably doubt their effectiveness. Unemployment is high in this region (17½% in Komarno, 19% in Gabcikovo) and one is left to wonder what the Hungarian Coalition intends to do about it. They seem more interested in pursuing issues like language use and autonomy - something we were told in several places Hungarians did not want.

All the people we spoke to blamed the tensions that had arisen over the minority on the politicians. No one seemed to think their rights were being seriously abused, in fact, we were told that they had more rights than many other minorities. However, there is no doubt that most people here would vote for the Magyar Coalition.

The reasons seem to be more an amorphous sense of belonging rather than a commitment to any particular political programme. It has been the norm in Eastern Europe and one promoted by human rights groups that minorities are best represented by their own parties. However, it could be argued that the minority's best interests would be pursued by their participation in the mainstream parties. It would then be beholden on Hungarian MPs., for example, to fight for their constituents interests as citizens as well as an ethnic group. At a recent meeting in Budapest Peter Weiss, leader of the SDL party echoed these thoughts. It is not inconceivable that Hungarians in southern Slovakia will one day realise that their best interests lie with the major parties and not with those who have sought to keep them apart.

CONCLUSION

While the Slovak elections were conducted freely and fairly this cannot mean, unfortunately, that the country is heading for a period of political and social stability necessary for economic progress. Put in a nutshell, for too many influential sectors, the "wrong man" won. It can be predicted that those who wish to see Meciar finally eliminated from public life will try again to achieve their goal. More journalistic revelations may be forthcoming and subsequent scandals or other pressures may persuade HZDS MPs to defect. Business confidence will consequently diminish and another 'crisis' will come about. The corrosive nature of Slovak politics and the media's coverage of the issues and personalities can do little to promote respect for democracy. At the same time, the Slovak electorate is likely to remain sceptical about received opinion and Western advice.

A major problem is that every time there is a change of government a whole shaft of the administration changes too. As we saw, when Meciar came to power changes were made to the procedures for electing personnel for Slovak TV. When the new government took over in March, 1994 yet more changes took place in Slovak TV and the director of the Slovak News Agency (TASR) was dismissed on 19th April. The Moravcik government also sacked 26 heads of several district government offices in April. The tug-of-war over how to conduct privatisation and who should benefit from it so evident over the last few years is hardly likely to diminish now.

The unfortunate fact is that large sectors of Slovak public life, including the civil service and state-run broadcast media, seem destined to remain highly-politicised. Their functioning is likely to be damaged by the fact that their officials will be working under political pressure and the need to "cover their backs" in the event of another change of regime. Neither Meciar nor Moravcik can be said to have promoted an apolitical climate among civil servants. President Kovac's exercise of his powers of patronage has also been tinged with political manoeuvring.

The irony of Slovakia's continuing political instability is that her economic problems have not been much more acute than forecast at the time of the split in the Czechoslovak Federation. The more time that is now consumed by political strife, the less likely it is that any Slovak government will be able to pursue a consistent economic policy.¹⁶

APPENDIX 1
General Election 5-6th June, 1992

Turnout: 84.5%; Qualification: 7% threshold. Parties gaining representation in parliament.

Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS) - 37.26%
Party of Democratic Left (ex-Communist) - 14.70%
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) - 8.88%
The Slovak National Party - 7.99%
Co-existence-Magyar Democratic Forum - 7.42%
Not elected: Hungarian Civic Party - 2.3%

APPENDIX 2
General Election 30th September-1st October.1994

Turnout: 75.65%

Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS) - 34.96%
Common Choice (ex-Communist Coalition) - 10.41%
Hungarian Coalition - 10.18%
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) - 10.08%
Democratic Union (DU) - 8.57%
Workers Party - 7.34%
Slovak National Party (SNP) - 5.40%

PARTIES CONTESTING 1994 SLOVAK ELECTIONS

Movement for a Prosperous Slovakia; Social Democrats; Hungarian Coalition (Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement, Együttélés, Hungarian Civic Party); Common Choice; Democratic Union; Anti-Corruption Party; Republican Co-operation; Democratic Party; Liberals; New Slovakia; Communist Party of Slovakia; Romany Citizen's Initiative (ROI); Slovak National Party; Christian Democratic Movement; Movement for a Democratic Slovakia; Christian Social Union of Slovakia; Real Social Democratic Party of Slovakia.

The order given above of the parties contesting the election corresponds to their place on the electoral list.

NOTES

¹ See "Pozadi pripadu DOKTOR" and "Spisy byly v Trencine" in Respekt (2- 8th March, 1992). The articles together were entitled "MECIAR KONEC KARIERY?"

² See Jana Dorotkova, "My Enemy, Mr Anonymous" in Prognosis (4-17 February, 1994) who quotes Milan Knazko, who characterized the premier "as a dangerous lunatic who had seen too many Schwarzeneger movies".

³ Interview with Alastair Macleod, Kosice (29th September, 1994).

^{3a} In fact, turnout was low so soon after the elections, with the government coalition parties boycotting the campaign, and in the absence of much media coverage. Only 19% of Slovaks voted, less than the 50% required, but 94% of these voters endorsed L'uptak's proposal, suggesting that his reservoir of potential support was larger than his parliamentary vote, despite the failure of the referendum itself.

⁴ See edited by A. Heneka, et al., "A Besieged Culture": Czechoslovakia Ten Years after Helsinki (Stockholm-Vienna, 1985), 248.

⁵ See Miklos Duray, "Letter to the General Prosecutor of Slovakia" (16th March, 1987) in East European Reporter vol.2 no.3 (1987), 23.

⁶ Fred Pearce, "Dam Truths on the Danube" in The New Scientist (17 September 1994).

⁷ See Thornberry's International Law and the Rights of Minorities (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991)

⁸ See, for example, Ian Traynor, "Jittery Slovakia hears echoes of Bosnia" in The Guardian (10th January, 1994)

⁹ See Ferenc Glatz, Minorities in East-Central Europe Europa Institute (Budapest, 1993)

¹⁰ See Matt Welch, "Slovakia's 'Media Policy' of Delusion" in Prognosis (29th October-11th November, 1993).

¹¹ See Jana Dorotkova, "My Enemy, Mr. Anonymous" in Prognosis, (4-17th February, 1994).

¹² Matt Welch, "The Smug and the Addled" in Prognosis (6-12th October, 1994).

¹³ See Milan Nic, et al., "New Slovak Government: More Stability?" in RFE/RL II/47 (26 November, 1993), 26.

¹⁴ See, "Budoucnost Vladimira Meciar" Respekt (2-8 March, 1992).

¹⁵ Quoted by Matt Welch, "The Smug and the Addled" in Prognosis (6-12th October, 1994).

¹⁶ Five weeks after the elections (4th November), a new government had yet to be formed. However, an informal alliance of HzDS, Slovak National Party and Workers' Party had voted to replace the membership of various key parliamentary committees and to halt/reverse more than 70 privatisations already announced. This provoked a walk-out by members of the defeated government coalition – hardly a good omen for the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Also The European Security Analyst; BBC Summary of World Broadcasts; CSCE staff "Report on Slovakia", Washington, April 1992.

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