SLOVAK POLITICAL PARTIES BEFORE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2002

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Contents:

1. A description of the electoral system and its changes

Since November 1989, four general elections were held in Slovakia in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 1998. The first post-communist electoral law abolished the majority system of the Communist regime and re-introduced the proportional representation system that had existed in the first Czechoslovak Republic of 1918-1938. A proportional system based on a party list with preferential votes was established. The adopted electoral law for the Slovak parliament was meant to curb parliamentary fragmentation by adopting the relatively high threshold of three per cent for single parties. For elections to the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly and the Czech parliament the threshold was even higher, five per cent. Under these conditions, after the 1990 elections only seven of the 36 competing parties entered the Slovak National Council. The 1992 amendment of the electoral law increased the threshold for single parties to five per cent also in Slovakia and introduced a new provision regulating formation of electoral coalitions. It requested seven per cent for coalitions of two and three parties and ten per cent for a coalition of more than four parties. In these conditions, after the 1992 elections only five of the 23 parties that submitted their party lists succeeded in entering the Slovak parliament. Only minor changes to the 1992 electoral law were introduced before the 1994 elections. Although the 1992 threshold requirements were maintained in the 1994 elections, the outcome was quite different. In 1994, parties chose to form electoral coalitions, which resulted in a more fragmented parliament. Though formally only eight parties entered parliament, they actually represented as many as sixteen parties.

The electoral system in Slovakia has had a strong impact on the formation of political parties and coalitions. Once parties gained parliamentary positions, they constantly attempted to change the rules in order to improve their chances of their parliamentary survival. However, the example of the 1994 elections shows that the actual outcomes of electoral-law engineering very often differed from desired outcomes. Before the 1994 elections, deputies hoped to decrease the number of political parties in parliament and increased therefore the requirements for parties to receive government funding. Yet by simultaneously increasing the amount of state financial contributions, parliament managed to increase the incentives for coalition formation among numerous small parties which hope to enter parliament through a coalition. Therefore many minor parties are surviving and still emerging in Slovakia.

In 1995, the National Council passed an amendment to the electoral law regarding the selection of deputy substitutes. According to the previous law, when a deputy gives up her/his seat in parliament (incompatibility rule, death, etc.), she/he was replaced by the next candidate on the party list. The amendment gave party leaders the freedom to choose a substitute deputy regardless

of the order on the party list. The HZDS, the largest party in Slovakia, has been attempting to change the electoral system since 1993, though without much success. Spurred by their loss of a parliamentary majority in March 1994, HZDS has been searching for a new electoral system that would render an "efficient majority" of a single party, i.e., the three-fifths necessary to change the constitution. At a HZDS party conference in March 1996, Vladimír Mečiar complained that the proportional system resulted in too many political parties gaining seats in parliament, and suggested the adoption of a first-past-the-post or a mixed electoral system, with the ultimate goal of creating a two-party system (one of which, obviously, would be HZDS).

In April 1996, Mečiar's cabinet proposed an administrative reform plan which changed the country's territorial administration units, creating eight regions and 79 districts, though not defining their areas of administrative powers. It was assumed that this was the first step toward a majority or a mixed electoral system. Leaders of the HZDS's coalition partners, the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Association of Workers in Slovakia (ZRS) agreed, however, that the proportional system was more favorable to their small parties, their support oscillating around five per cent of voters. Therefore, the HZDS had to modify its plans, as its coalition partners were not willing to sacrifice their own interests.

In May 1998, only four months before the parliamentary elections, and despite the broad public criticism, parliament adopted the new Election Law. According to its provisions, Slovakia formed one electoral region. The act required a five percent level for each party for parliamentary entry, including subjects joined in pre-election coalitions. The act does not allow for a campaign in the commercial media. This law was believed to improve the position of Mečiar's party in several respects. First, one electoral district increases the chances of political parties with a strong and charismatic leaders. Second, the effective prohibition of electoral coalitions damaged the opposition, because the five opposition parties which formed the Slovak Democratic Coalition and three Hungarian parties grouped in the Hungarian Coalition were forced to create one party. This required difficult and time-consuming negotiations, and the profiles of leading opposition parties may have suffered as a result. Third, the amendment deleted a paragraph, according to which the Central Electoral Commission (UVK) has a right to govern over elections, and its powers were divided between UVK and electoral commissions (OVK) at district level. This implicitly increased the power of the Ministry of Interior, because its officials can nominate members of the OVK in cases when political parties do not nominate their members, which may be a rather frequent situation in small districts.

However, this attempt of Mečiar to render more favorable conditions for his party failed. Although the HZDS appeared as the strongest party in the 150-seat legislature, with 27 percent of the vote and 43 seats, it was not able to form a majority government. The only party which wanted to enter into a coalition with the HZDS was the Slovak National Party, which won 14 seats, however, their

combined mandates were insufficient for reaching a parliamentary majority. Since the 1998 elections Slovakia has had a new government led by the Slovak Democratic Coalition, which came a strong second to the HZDS. Together with the Party of the Democratic Left, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition and the Party of Civic Understanding, the government commanded a 93-seat majority. This meant that the new government has acquired a power to change the constitution and immediately started to prepare an amendment allowing the direct elections of the president and other changes.

As early as in January 1999 the National Council approved a constitutional amendment changing the mode of presidential elections from indirect (with president elected by the parliament) to a direct (popular) elections. The president is now elected by all the eligible voters, however, the powers of the presidency were not increased. Thus, Slovakia still remains a parliamentary republic. In May 1999 the first direct presidential elections took place; in the second round Rudolf Schuster, the leader of the Party of Civic Understanding, won over the former prime minister Vladimír Mečiar, and was sworn in to office in June 1999.

In August 1999 the parliament agreed to some changes to the Election Law. The main change was the reintroduction of the 5 per cent threshold for a separately running party, while a coalition of two or three parties had to win 7 per cent, and a coalition of four or more parties had to receive at least 10 per cent, in order to qualify for parliamentary seats. Even though there have been attempts to modify the law especially in late 2001 and early 2002, these were not successful. Especially smaller parties supporting the government proposed to increase the number of electoral districts (currently, whole territory of Slovakia constitutes one electoral district), to give more weight to the preferential votes and to allow for the electoral campaign to be conducted also in commercial media. However, none of these proposals was successful. The KDH and the SMK, among the coalition government parties, argued it was inappropriate to change the law shortly before the elections, and the HZDS and the leader of Smer Fico claimed they would rather support a wholesale change into a majority electoral system. Nonetheless, the fact is that the party leaders were not sure what consequences these proposed changes would have for their parties, and thus preferred to maintain the existing electoral rules with rather predictable consequences.

Besides a constitutional amendment of 1999 introducing direct presidential election, another major change to the country's supreme legal norm was approved in February 2001. Among other things, it provided for the reform of public administration (see below) and the passing of legislation on regional elections. The immunity of the parliamentary deputies was somewhat limited, and the powers of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Audit Office increased. The independence of judiciary was also strengthened and the institution of Ombudsman was introduced. The amendment was approved by the parties of the ruling majority, while the opposition voted against

these changes. In early 2002, following disagreements in the coalition government, a HZDS-nominated lawyer Pavel Kandráč was elected Ombudsman by the National Council.

At the end of 2001 Slovak politics concentrated around the first regional elections, scheduled for 1st and 15th of December. Although Slovakia has proportional electoral system for the national elections, the parliament opted for the majority system at the regional level of government. This law was passed soon after establishing eight new regions (see below). The Act on regional election provides for two separate lists of candidates, one for the Head of the region and the second for the Regional assemblies. The election of regional heads has a two-round mechanism. The Act allows also for independent (i.e. non-party candidates) to stand in the elections. In the eight regional assemblies there is altogether 401 deputies.

2. Characteristics of the relevant Slovak political parties

In this section we give a short analysis of the relevant political parties that have operated in Slovakia in the period following the general elections of 1998. We first proceed with the description of the parties that form the coalition government. Second, the parliamentary opposition parties are paid attention to. Third, new parties that were established in the period prior to the 2002 elections are characterized as well. However, among the new parties we take into account only those ones that, according to the public opinion polls, have all chances to make its way to the National Council. Other minor parties are mentioned only as far as their activities directly relate to the life of the other existing parliamentary parties.

2.1 The Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) and The Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU)

The Slovak Democratic Coalition was established in 1997 as a coalition of five parties of various ideological stances (Christian Democrats, The Democratic Union and three junior partners, the Democratic Party, Social Democrats and the Greens) primarily as a response to the previous cabinet's decision to thwart referendum on direct presidential election and NATO membership. As a consequence of the electoral law passed in May 1998 that effectively prevented party alliances to run in the parliamentary elections (see above), the SDK was transformed into a single party. However, the original parties also remained in existence, even though all the leading representatives of the parties, with the exception of the chairs of Christian Democrats and the Greens, joined the SDK "electoral" party. A Christian Democrat, Mikuláš Dzurinda, was elected party chairman at party founding congress in July 1998, while representatives of all the other SDK "original parties" were elected deputy chairpersons. Already in this period there were different views on the future of the SDK. Some politicians understood it only as a temporary solution to overcome the pitfalls of the electoral law, others though, perceived the SDK as a first step towards creating a major party. However, the debates on the future of the SDK reopened vigorously only after the elections of 1998, in which the SDK came strong second (26,3% and 42 out of 150 seats in the National Council) and its leader became the prime minister of the new cabinet. The SDK formed a coalition government with the Party of Democratic Left (SDL), the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP). The internal strife in the SDK was a dominant issue during over a half of the 1998-2002 electoral period, as many of the elected SDK parliamentary deputies preserved strong ties to their "original parties" and advocated the return to a coalition of five parties. This strategy, however, met with strong resistance from the SDK leader Dzurinda, who was supported by various senior Christian Democratic and Democratic Union

politicians. At an SDK party congress in June 1999, no agreement was found, however, a cooperation agreement was reached among the representatives of the "original parties" on their support to the coalition government. A decision on remaining in a single SDK parliamentary party club was made as well. In late 1999 the party leader Dzurinda presented his vision for the SDK, where he supported its transformation into a "union" of "original parties"; while each party would remain organizationally separate, they would together form a single party. After this proposal was rejected, Dzurinda and seven ministers nominated by the SDK, together with other senior SDK politicians, announced in January 2000 they were ready to offer the Slovak voters a new union of "directions, streams and personalities" that would carry the ideas of the SDK during the whole period to the elections of 2002. The party later became known as the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (the SDKU), the acronym strongly resembling the SDK and the name combining the elements of both Christian Democrats and the Democratic Union, two major original parties. While refusing to form its own platform in the SDK parliamentary party club, however, at least 19 SDK deputies felt close to the SDKU. With the new party organization building in progress, it became clear that the SDKU tried to build on the organizational and personal resources of the original parties. In Summer 2000, a merger agreement between the Democratic Union and the SDKU was signed and approved by the DU party congress. The SDKU founding congress, held in late 2000, elected Dzurinda the party chairman. The SDKU is trying to present itself as a people's party, combining Christian democratic and liberal views. Since 2001 it is an associate member of the European People's Party. In the pre-election period it has been portraying itself as the main guarantee of Slovakia's successful integration into the European Union and NATO. Even though its representatives initially insisted that the time of the electoral alliances of small parties was over (thus implying that the SDKU would become a large party), with its support stabilized around 12 per cent, the SDKU leaders proposed to form a pre-election coalition of "reform-minded" political parties. This was echoed rather positively by a newly formed Alliance of a New Citizen (see below), and was not refused by the Party of Hungarian Coalition. However, as the Christian Democrats asserted they were running in the elections as a separate party, the idea of a broad electoral alliance was abandoned.

The SDKU was the first Slovak party to use the party primaries for the selection of its candidates for the elections. This selection process was used for the first time in 2001 to choose candidates for the election to the newly formed regional self-governments. All party members were eligible to vote in party primaries and their selection of party candidates was a final one. For the primaries to the parliamentary elections, however, the procedure was modified: Even though the party members were still able to select their party candidates for the party list, the party leadership had the right to choose top five candidates and every odd candidate being placed on the party list between position 6 and 15. The remaining positions were to be filled by the candidates selected in the primaries.

Even there, however, the party leadership had a right to change the order of candidates (used eventually only in one case). This change probably reflected the changing nature of the party between its inception in 2000 and preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2002: The party originally presenting itself as a union of "directions, streams and personalities", thus trying to attract as many voters and ("original parties") activists as possible, became organizationally stabilized and firmly controlled by the party leadership.

2.2 The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)

The KDH is one of the few Slovak parties with organizational continuity and parliamentary presence since the first democratic elections of 1990. It has been a member of the European Democratic Union and is a recognized member of the Christian Democratic family. It was a member of the coalition government three times: In the period 1990-1992 (from 1991 its chairman Ján Čarnogurský was prime minister of the Slovak government) and again for a brief period between March and December 1994. In 1997 it was the largest party of the Slovak Democratic Coalition. Following the decision to transform the coalition into a single party, the leader of the Christian democrats announced he had supported the move, nevertheless he had not joined the SDK. Instead Čarnogurský, probably envisaging the future disputes over the fate of the SDK, decided to stay only in the KDH, preparing conditions for a revival of Christian democrats after the elections of 1998. In the new cabinet, Čarnogurský assumed the post of the Minister of Justice (as the portfolio was allocated to the SDK). He was the only cabinet member voting against the government manifesto in 1998, the move that was commented on by political observers as an attempt to restate the identity of the Christian democrats vis-_-vis their coalition partners (Čarnogurský perceived the program as not giving justice to the position of the religious schools and omitting the relationship of Slovakia with the Vatican). After the prime minister's decision to form a new party, several senior KDH politicians left their original party and joined the SDKU. The KDH found itself in the position when its very existence was questioned. This can be a clue to various activities of the party, emphasizing throughout the period Christian values, the importance of family, rejection of special rights for sexual minorities, etc. After the SDKU founding congress had been held, nine KDH members of the SDK parliamentary party group decided to established their own parliamentary club. The decision followed the party congress in October 2000, where Čarnogurský, the leader of the party since its inception, did not stand for reelection. The delegates followed Čarnogurský's recommendation and chose Pavol Hrušovský as new party chairman. After that, the KDH was invited by the other parties of the government to sign an amendment to the coalition agreement, thus receiving all rights of a coalition government member.

Christian democrats also emphasized national sovereignty and law and order issues. The KDH parliamentary deputies repeatedly proposed to the National Council measures that would cancel the 1998 amnesties of the previous prime minister Mečiar for crimes related to the abduction of the former president's son and to the 1997 thwarted referendum. They also prepared the Declaration on Cultural and Ethical Sovereignty of the Member and Candidate States that was later approved by the National Council. The party congress in late 2001 also endorsed the decision of the party leadership not to enter any pre-election alliances. Even though the support for the KDH in the public opinion polls have dropped compared to the levels in 1997-98 (i.e. before formation of the SDK), the party managed to assert its distinctive ideological identity and consolidate its organization following the departure of a considerable number of party leadership and activists to the SDKU. With these events in mind we can better understand why the KDH is a more conservative party than ever before.

2.3 The Party of Democratic Left (SDL) and the Social Democratic Alternative (SDA)

Of all the parliamentary parties, the Party of Democratic Left has gone through the most dramatic development in terms of its popular support and party strategy. The 1998 elections brought the party a surprisingly good performance (14,7 per cent of the votes and 23 parliamentary deputies), thus giving it a position of a pivotal party, without which any workable coalition government was inconceivable. Being aware of its strong bargaining position, the party received six government posts, more than a strictly proportional share would suggest, and Jozef Migaš, the party leader, was elected Speaker of the National Council.

A significant event happened shortly after the coalition government was formed in late October 1998: The SDL's most popular politician, first deputy chairman Robert Fico, announced his resignation to the position. The move was widely interpreted as one of a young politician with unfulfilled ambitions, as Fico was the only person from the party top leadership who was not nominated to a major executive or legislative position. In September 1999 he left the parliamentary party club altogether and established his new party Smer (Direction). At the same time, the preferences of the SDL fell dramatically, as most of the disappointed voters turned to the leader of the Smer. In a move for remedy, the SDL leadership, and especially its chairman Migaš, launched strong criticism of the government's policies, calling for softening of the painstaking reform measures. In addition, the party leader repeatedly stressed the need to be more socially sensitive by increasing revenues for the state budget, and paying more attention to the raising unemployment. He repeatedly called for cabinet reshuffles, even though without further specifications. Moreover, the SDL Agriculture Minister Pavel Koncoš, had long-lasting arguments with the Party of Hungarian Coalition (the SMK) over various land issues, repeatedly refusing to comply with the governmental

program, on which the SMK insisted. In his position, Koncoš was always supported by the SDL chairman. The situation became especially dramatic in April 2000, when Migaš together with four other SDL parliamentary deputies joined the opposition and voted for a no-confidence motion to the government as a whole. Even though the government sustained the vote, Migaš did not withdraw his party from the coalition, as he probably did not have enough support within the broader party leadership. There were no changes made in the composition of the government as a result of the events, however, since the SDK, SOP and SMK refused to make any. Instead, the two factions within the SDL itself became more visible, one (led by Migaš himself) advocating a tough stance to the government, the other condemning Migaš' actions and calling for what it perceived as modern social democratic policy. At a party congress in July 2000, however, Migaš was reelected party chairman obtaining 223 votes, while his main opponent Ftáčnik coming second with 182 votes. Moreover, in the second part of the congress held three months later, a proposal of the "modernists" to institutionalize party dissent in a form of party factions failed and the power position of Migaš within the party was gradually consolidated. These developments, however, did not halt the fall of party preferences, just the opposite. In mid-2001, according to public opinion polls, SDL had a support smaller than 5 per cent necessary to reached the parliamentary presence. The SDL still insisted on a complex reconstruction of cabinet, however, without any success.

The party congress in November 2001 was widely perceived as a place where the Gordian knot of the future direction was to be dissolved. Migaš decided not to stand for reelection and supported Pavel Koncoš. He was reelected already in the first round of the election, securing an absolute majority of 256 votes out of 411. His main opponent Peter Weiss received only 90 votes. The "reformers" were definitively defeated, even though they rejected the idea of leaving the party. The new chair Koncoš denied he was planning any changes to the SDL cabinet members, claiming it was already too late. However, in early 2002 the new party chairman, backed by the broad party leadership, asked the prime minister to remove Brigita Schmögnerová, an SDL nominee, from the post of the Minister of Finance. Koncoš attacked her for not complying with the party line and for applying strongly anti-social policies. This triggered the process of the SDL disintegration, as the former SDL leader Weiss announced he was forming a new social democratic party. Eventually, Schmögnerová resigned from her position and joined Weiss, only to be followed by the SDL Education Minister Ftáčnik. The founding congress of the Social Democratic Alternative elected Ftáčnik party chairman and Weiss party leader. The Social Democratic Alternative attracted several parliamentary deputies from the SDL, SOP and extra-parliamentary Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS), however, it remains to be seen whether it will be able to overcome the 5 per cent parliamentary threshold. In no public opinion poll conducted in 2002 did the SDL or SDA have that necessary support. Even though the SDL is present in the National Council with almost 20 deputies (still the second largest ruling party in the coalition government), it has not been able to reassert a

credible social democratic image. The opposition of the party to privatization of the Slovak Gas Industry and to changes to the Labor code, did not do much help in this respect. There have been negotiations between the SDL and other small left-leaning parties, especially the SOP and the SDSS, about a possible electoral alliance, as the SDL offered the two some places on its party list. However, it is unlikely they will be present in the future National Council.

2.4 The Party of Civic Understanding (SOP)

The Party of Civic Understanding was established in early 1998 by Rudolf Schuster, a popular Mayor of Slovakia's second largest town of Košice. Relying on an extensive media coverage, provided especially by TV Markíza, Schuster was able to set up a party to which he recruited several popular faces from local as well as national politics. Even though the party tried to play a role of a third force in the pre-1998 period, skillfully maneuvering between the opposition and the government, it soon made it clear that it intended to form a coalition government with the other opposition parties, as it did in October 1998. The SOP received 8 per cent of the votes (13 parliamentary mandates and 2 cabinet portfolios), substantially less than the polls had indicated in the period prior to the elections. The major challenge to the party, however, came from within, when its leader was elected Slovak president in the first direct election in May 1999. Schuster left the chairmanship of the SOP, which was thus left without raison d'_tre. The identity crises was acknowledged by Pavol Hamžík, the new party chairman, who admitted that after departure of Schuster the SOP faced a new beginning and the need for professionalization and standardization. In late 1999 the party deputy chairman Ján Mazák was appointed the Chief Justice of the Slovak Constitutional Court. For some time the new party leader tried to present the party as a new center ("third way") party, which was planned to be emphasized by a change of the party name. Neither ideological revival, nor party name change, however, took place. The party remained a solid supporter of the government until early 2001, when its leader, the deputy prime minister for European integration Hamžík, was forced to leave the cabinet by prime minister Dzurinda, who perceived him as responsible for a scandal concerning the use of money from the funds of the European union. One of Hamžík's directors in the Government Office was allegedly involved in some financial irregularities concerning the distribution of the money from the European union (though, later, no irregularities were found). Since Hamžík left the cabinet, he started accusing the prime minister for being personally responsible for coalition crises and disputes. The weakness of the SOP is thus well illustrated, as the party facing the expulsion of its leader from the cabinet was unable to carry out any credible threats or other counter-measures. In 2001, the party, despite being able to recruit four former SDK parliamentary deputies to its parliamentary club, was undergoing a steady process of decay. Several members of the top party leadership resigned from

their positions and bitter disputes between the party leader and some regional party leaders were a regular feature of the party life. In mid-2001 a party congress was held that also highlighted the state of the party: Even though Hamžík was reelected party leader, delegates supporting his opponent Mária Machová (an SOP nominee in the cabinet) left the party congress meeting to protest against the internal party development. Several SOP parliamentarians later left the party club, however, the (mis)functioning of the party was not visibly affected. In early 2002 there were discussions between the SOP and the extra-parliamentary Social Democratic Party of Slovakia on possible a merger and later this year an agreement was reached between the SOP and the SDL that some SOP representatives would appear on the SDL party list. The electoral support for the SOP has decreased to minimal levels and the party rarely polled over 3 per cent in 2002. Thus, the survival of the SOP as a parliamentary party after the 2002 elections is highly unlikely.

2.5 The Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)

The circumstances accompanying the establishment of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition were similar to those that played crucial role in the formation of the Slovak Democratic Coalition. The SMK was set up as a reaction to the electoral law of 1998 that effectively prevented the three previously existing parties representing the Hungarian minority from forming a pre-election alliance. As a result of long-lasting negotiations it was agreed that the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (the MKDH) changed its name and bylaws and the Hungarian Civic Party and the Coexistence, other two liberal and liberal-conservative Hungarian minority parties would merge with the MKDH. The whole process lasted for about two months. However, contrary to the developments in the SDK, the SMK did not subsequently go through phases of internal strives and disintegration. Instead, the SMK has been the most stable part of the coalition government since 1998, both in terms of the stability of its parliamentary party club and its electoral support. In the 1998 elections the party received 9,1 per cent of the vote, which amounted to 15 parliamentary seats. The party holds three cabinet portfolios. The party is a full member of the European Democratic Union and an affiliated member of the European People's Party. Obviously, its agenda is closely tied with the protection of the interests of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia, even though some of the SMK representatives have ambitions to transform the SMK from an ethnically based party into a regional party attractive to both Hungarian and Slovak voters.

The presence of the SMK in the coalition government has not always been perceived favorably by all the coalition members. The disputes between the SMK and the SDL were quite frequent, especially over the issues of the so-called unclaimed land. The SDL-nominated Minister of Agriculture ignored the government program, while the SMK insisted the unclaimed land should become a property of the local governments. The SMK also insisted, (as it was agreed in the

government manifesto) that the government approved the Council of Europe's Charter of Regional and Minority Languages and that a Faculty of Education for Hungarian Teachers was to be set up. In 2000 it tied its support to the wide-reaching constitutional amendment to the fulfillment of the three above mentioned conditions. In early 2001 a compromise between the coalition partners was reached and the SMK supported the constitutional amendments. In July 1999 the parliament passed the law on the use of minority languages in the state administration, and even though the SMK was not fully satisfied with it and eventually voted against the proposal, by its mere presence in the National Council the minimal quorum of the present deputies was reached (the opposition deputies walked away) and the other government parties were thus able to pass the law.

In the discussions on the new administrative division of Slovakia and on creation of the (previously non-existent) regional self-governments, a major coalition dispute and crisis emerged in mid-2001. While initially the government parties agreed to support the proposal of the Government Plenipotentiary for Public Administration Reform, later the SDL and SOP changed their views and joined the opposition to approve another model (see below). The SMK was bitterly disappointed and announced it was leaving the coalition, as the behavior of the SDL and SOP constituted a flagrant breach of the coalition program and agreement. Later it modified it stance claiming that if a series of related statutes were not approved within a short period of time, it would leave the cabinet. In September and October 2001 these laws were approved by the parliament and the SMK claimed that, though dissatisfied with the administrative division of the country, it would remain a part of the coalition government.

Controversies over the SMK raised again in April 2002, when the party deputy chairman Miklós Duray supported Fidesz, the party of the then Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban at a pre-election rally in Hungarian capital Budapest. In the following weeks he also made several controversial statements on the issues sensitive in the Slovak-Hungarian relations. As a result, the SMK leadership issued a policy directive ordering all SMK candidates not to comment on selected issues (however, the party did not make the list of these issues publicly known). Apparently, the SMK wants to increase by this move its chances in winning votes of Slovak voters. In the public opinion polls in 2002, the SMK had a steady support of between 10 and 13 per cent of the votes, of which a considerable share comes from non-Hungarians (Slovaks).

2.6 The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)

The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia has been electorally the most successful Slovak political party. It was in power (alone or as a senior coalition member) between June 1992 and March 1994 and again between December 1994 and October 1998. Even though in the elections of 1998 it came first with a narrow margin of 0,7 per cent, there were no parties apart from the Slovak

National Party willing to form a coalition government with the HZDS. The policies of the Slovak government of 1994-1998, of which the HZDS was a dominant part, were held responsible for Slovakia's failure to be invited to NATO and to open talks on EU accession in early 1998. Moreover, the party was held responsible for violating civic and political rights (the thwarted referendum of 1997, the striping of a member of parliament of his parliamentary mandate in 1996). Most of the blame was attributed to Vladimír Mečiar, the party founding leader, who has been firmly in control of the party for over a decade. Among many other things, he was widely criticized for granting amnesty to those involved in abduction of the president's son and those who thwarted referendum in 1997.

Following the elections of 1998, the HZDS remained in a parliamentary opposition and its leader did even not assume his place in the parliament. However, in May 1999 he ran for the office of president and lost to Rudolf Schuster, who enjoyed the support of the ruling parties. Nevertheless, the party itself was left without any long-term strategy. It did not accept any leadership positions in the parliament (chairmanship of the parliamentary committees) with an exception of a deputy chairmanship of the joint National Council–European Parliament integration committee. Even though the party rhetorically supported Slovakia's effort to join NATO, in March 1999 several HZDS parliamentarians strongly condemned NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia, calling the NATO leaders "war criminals". The party signed a treaty on cooperation with the SNS in 2000, even though the SNS was openly anti-NATO oriented. The party has been very critical of virtually all aspects of the government policies, and in early 2000 it started collecting signatures asking the president to call for a referendum on early elections. The referendum took place in November 2000, however, due to a low turnout (20 per cent) it was not successful (for a referendum to be successful, at least 50 per cent of the eligible voters must take part and of those at least 50 per cent must vote for the proposal). The party underwent an attempt to transform itself into a new entity in March 2000 (until then, the HZDS was considered by its representatives to be a broad citizens' movement). However, the only visible results of the transformation was a partial change of the name (since then the official name of the party is the HZDS – People's Party) and strengthening of the position of the party leader, who has an exclusive right to nominate the deputy chairpersons to the party congress. In addition, following the "transformation party congress" all party members had to re-register, the result of which was a drop of party membership from about 70 000 to about 40 000. The party now claims its adherence to conservative values despite the fact that it was repeatedly denied a membership in the European Democratic Union.

In 2000 the party leader claimed that the constitutional amendments prepared by the government will effectively undermine state sovereignty and in February 2001 the party parliamentarians voted against the amendments, again accusing the government of giving away the national sovereignty. Since then, however, the rhetoric of the top party representatives has begun to change. Party

representatives started emphasizing their support for an early accession of Slovakia to NATO and even abandoned cooperation with the SNS on this basis. The party leader repeatedly voiced his interest in future cooperation with some of the governing parties (mentioning virtually all parties with reasonable chances to get to the next parliament). Moreover, in late 2001 at an HZDS-organized conference on NATO, Mečiar claimed that his party was ready to remain in opposition, were it not credible party for the NATO members, only to deny he was contemplating such steps some months later. In October 2001 Mečiar supported the government's decision to open Slovak air space for US combat planes in the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan.

In December 2001 the HZDS was a clear winner of the first regional elections. The HZDS refused to cooperate with the SNS and in some regions it created pre-election coalitions with other parties (SDL, SOP, Smer), thus de facto gaining some acceptance. In the party congress in April 2002 Mečiar was unanimously reelected party chairman and again emphasized his intention to win elections and to form a coalition government. In all public opinion polls his party comes first. The crucial question we explore in the last part of this work is whether Mečiar himself or another senior HZDS politician will be able to form the coalition cabinet, or whether HZDS will still be perceived as an untrustworthy party.

2.7 The Slovak National Party (SNS) and The True Slovak National Party (PSNS)

The Slovak National Party has always been able to secure parliamentary presence since the first democratic elections of 1990. In the following period, it was a junior coalition partner of HZDS in the period between June 1992 and March 1994 (with a brief period following the withdrawal from the cooperation with HZDS in 1993) and again between 1994 and 1998. In the elections of 1998 the party received 9,1 per cent of the vote and secured 14 parliamentary mandates. It has remained in opposition since then. The party has always been strongly nationalistic, even xenophobic, claiming to protect the national interests of all ethnic Slovaks. The SNS emphasizes its adherence to Christian values and its conservative political stance, however, anti-Hungarian sentiments have always been a major part of its ideology and presentation. In recent years SNS also became strongly anti-western and anti-American, critical of the NATO campaign against Yugoslavia in early 1999 and accusing the NATO leaders from committing war crimes. The party strongly opposes Slovakia's entry into NATO. In the period after the 1998 elections the party was extremely critical of virtually all measures adopted by the government, accusing the prime minister and government parties of selling out national interests to what it called Hungarian irredenta. The party strongly disapproved the constitutional amendments passed in early 2001 on the same basis. Besides its frequent anti-Roma rhetoric, the party representatives pointed out an alleged threat of the country being overwhelmed by refugees.

In fact, however, the party itself was overwhelmed by internal strives that eventually lead to a split in 2001. The power struggle over control of the party erupted in early 1999 between the then party leader Ján Slota and his deputy Anna Malíková. There have never been any ideological disagreements between the two, the only difference being the more sophisticated media presentation by Malíková. In late September 1999 the party congress voted no-confidence to Slota, who refused to accept the results and cut off further discussion. The party congress was dissolved, however, Slota's opponents continued the session the following week. Malíková was elected new party leader there. In 2000 she tried to consolidate her power position in the party, often using methods that her opponents labeled as dictatorial. In 2001 the party Central Council temporarily suspended the party membership privileges of eight party parliamentarians, five of which (including Slota) were later expelled from the party altogether. After that Malíková's opponents left the party and created a new political subject named The True Slovak National Party (the PSNS). The founding congress of the party unanimously elected Ján Slota chairman of the party. The two parties basically took the same strategy: Accusing the other "national party" of betraying national interests and competing for the limited electorate by extremely nationalist anti-Hungarian appeals. In 2002 both parties tried to present itself as a true representative of the Slovak nation, organizing roundtable discussions and rallies of like-minded smaller nationalistic parties and cultural organizations. In May there have been some attempts to discuss the two parties' readiness to create a joint pre-election alliance, however, it was not clear how sincere these offers were. In opinion polls the PSNS did not reach a five percent threshold, while the SNS seemed to be just above the threshold. Thus, if there is no agreement between the two "national parties" on an electoral alliance, it is not wholly inconceivable that in the future National Council the Slovak nationalists will not be represented.

2.8 SMER

Following his departure from the Party of Democratic Left in September 1999, the former vice chairman of SDL Róbert Fico announced he was establishing a new party called Smer (Direction). He claimed that Slovak politics badly needed new faces in public life. Even in mid-2002, however, his party was little more than an organization firmly controlled by Fico, who has been a dominant media face of his party project. Nevertheless, the party (or perhaps its leader) has gone through significant refinements. In 2000 it seemed as if Fico was picking up whatever topic seemed to be popular in the public, emphasizing the need for a strong state protecting law and order, or accusing the SMK from being too narrow-minded and representing only particular interest of a minority at the expense of the rest of society. Fico also pointed out that members of the Roma minority were essentially trouble-makers, and advocated firm measures against Slovak citizens asking for political

asylum in another country. (In the period 1999 and 2000, several Slovak Romani demanded asylum in Great Britain, Belgium, Denmark and Finland.) Fico expressed his conviction that political ideologies were basically obsolete and useless and emphasized the importance of pragmatic approach to everyday political problems. Fico has been very critical of the prime minister Dzurinda and his government's policies, however, he equally condemned the HZDS and especially its leader Vladimír Mečiar. He also pointed out that his party was basically open to cooperate with any Slovak party, including the HZDS, but not with its party leader. Later in 2002 he claimed that for him it was equally difficult to imagine a cooperation with prime minister Dzurinda. Thus, Fico was deliberately trying to portray himself and his party as a third way between the basically incompetent government and corrupted and discredited opposition. Later in December 2001 the delegates of a party congress adopted the document "The Third Way, Slovakia and the Smer", in which the party claims it will try to combine all positive aspects of conservatism, social democracy and liberalism. The document mentions Britain's New Labour, German Social Democratic Party of Gerhard Schröder and what it calls the US New Democrats as an inspiration for Smer's political leaning. The party even started using a slightly modified name (Smer – the Third Way). By emphasizing this basically leftist leaning, Smer probably tried to take up the place of the declining SDL, thus struggling to make itself more acceptable and "readable" to potential foreign partners.

The party was visible also due to its leader's activities in the National Council, where he proposed several laws related to law and order. In mid-2000 the Smer organized a conference on nuclear development in Slovakia, after which Fico became advocating the completion of two reactor blocs of the Mochovce nuclear power plant and started accusing the government for striking a disadvantageous deal with the EU on closing another of Slovakia's power plants. Though he supported the idea of Slovakia's accession to the EU, he said the government was too open to, and obedient of, the EU proposals (in the process of the accession talks) and not defending national interests properly, although he rarely supplied any concrete examples. Fico was especially critical of government's record of struggle against criminality and corruption, suggesting several times the government should step down for its incompetence. The Smer also disagreed with the government's privatization strategy, claiming that if the state privatizes the so-called strategically important companies, it will not have sufficient leverage to influence economic policies. The popularity of the party is undoubtedly conditioned by the popularity of its founder and unquestioned leader, as Fico has been for some time the most popular Slovak politician and the party is, according to the polls, the second most popular political subject.

2.9 The Alliance of a New Citizen (ANO)

As in the previous case, there are political ambitions of an influential person behind the creation of the Alliance of a New Citizen (ANO) in early 2001. Pavol Rusko, the owner of a highly successful commercial TV station Markíza, had tried to influence political processes before he decided to set up his own party. In the period prior to the elections of 1998, TV Markíza was very critical of the government of Vladimír Mečiar. TV Markíza at that time supported the newly formed SOP of Rudolf Schuster and there are some indications that Rusko also helped Dzurinda to become the leader of the SDK. Throughout 2000 Rusko was showing his interest to join a political party and there have been some discussions that he might take over the SOP. However, in early 2001 Rusko announced he decided to form a brand new party. In the team that was to prepare the new party structures and organization were some publicly well-known faces (journalists from TV Markíza, managers and sportsmen), however, later the party was able to attract a few high profile personalities. The delegates of the founding party congress in May 2001 elected Rusko the chairman of the party. He claimed the party would be a classical liberal political subject determined to support free market measures and advocating Slovakia's early accession to the European Union and NATO. The ANO quickly established itself as a trustworthy party for around 8 per cent of voters. Even though the party representatives were critical of the Dzurinda government, they showed their readiness to create a pre-election alliance with the SDKU, KDH and SMK, in order to win the elections. At the same time Rusko made it clear he did not see the HZDS and SNS as credible partners. Nevertheless, after the Christian Democrats decided not to enter any pre-election coalition, Rusko gave up his proposal and concentrated on criticizing various government policies. The party even claimed that it would not be cooperating with SDKU leader Dzurinda after the elections, however, later it modified its statements saying that it did not have any conditions for a future cooperation .

Judging by the public opinion polls it seems that new parties (Smer and ANO) were able to establish themselves among Slovak voters and have reasonably good chances to enter the next parliament and even to participate in the future government. However, it is difficult to say now, whether they will go through a similar process the SOP did in 1998-2002, when it virtually disappeared as a relevant political force, or whether they will remain on the Slovak political scene as consolidated and stabile actors.

3. Political parties' attitude towards selected policy and political issues

In this section we briefly go over selected policy areas and issues and try to give an assessment of the relevant parties' stances. This is to highlight differences between existing parties and clarify positions they are likely to take in the period after the September 2002 election. As new party manifestos have not been ready during preparation of this report (with an exception of the SMK manifesto), we have to rely mostly on public statements of the party top representatives. In the end of this section we give possible scenarios as to what kinds of coalition governments are most likely to emerge once the election results are announced.

3.1 Parties and economic policies

Many political scientists agree that traditional left-right division does not apply to Slovak party system. Only rarely do parties present coherent economic strategies that could be classified as more to the right or to the left, and even if they do, government programs do not reflect these stances fully. There are several reasons for that. First, all governments since 1994 comprised parties that rhetorically subscribed to the leftist ideologies as well as parties claiming to be on the right side of political spectrum. Second, it has been argued that countries in transition have to pursue mixed economic strategies, combining deregulation and de-etatization with meeting social security expectation of the population. And third, Slovakia is a country with 20 per cent unemployment, the fact that strongly affects (and complicates) any government economic measures. Thus, the main differences between parties composing the 1994-1998 government of Vladimír Mečiar and that of the post-1998 Dzurinda's administration is said to be in quality, fairness and predictability of the overall framework they provide for economic subjects. It has been documented that the Mečiar administration pursued privatization that favored its political allies, typically by selling state-owned companies for extremely low price, proposing to "revitalize" companies (i.e. supplying heavy subsidies to selected non-state companies) or favoring domestic entrepreneurs at the expense of their foreign competition. In the end of its term in 1998, the HZDS initiated a referendum on banning the privatization of the so-called strategic companies (most of them natural monopolies, but major banks were included as well). Given the fact that throughout the period the HZDS had been very active in privatizing the state property, the only suitable explanation seems to be that by that act, the HZDS had tried to prevent the future government (from which it was likely to be excluded) from pursuing what was widely perceived as necessary privatization measures. However, the referendum was not successful, as less than 44 per cent of the voters took part. After the new government was formed in 1998, the parliament removed the revitalization law. In 1999 the Dzurinda government approved the law enabling privatization of the natural monopolies. However,

the SDL did not agree with the proposal and suggested the state should retain at least 51 per cent of the monopolies' shares. Moreover, it suggested the parliament should have a final say in the decision over the concrete privatization projects. It was agreed that while the state would retain a 51 per cent majority in some companies, the final word on the proposals would rest in the cabinet. The opposition (the HZDS and SNS), however, heavily criticized the law and voted against it. In the following period several banks were sold to foreign investors and privatization of a majority share in the Slovak Telecom was carried out as well. In all the cases, the opposition parties opposed the decisions.

Nevertheless, privatization of a 49 per cent share in the Slovak Gas Industry (SPP) turned out to be politically most controversial. Even though the privatization project was approved by the cabinet in 2001, just days before the share was to be sold to a company that won a tender in early 2002, the SDL representatives said they disagreed with the privatization deal. The SDL complained that the share price was lower than expected and called for the withdrawal of the offer. As an alternative, it suggested only a 25 per cent share should be sold. After long-lasting negotiations the SDL eventually accepted the original privatization deal, even though later its leader voted against it at a cabinet meeting. Parties of the parliamentary opposition again strongly disagreed and called the privatization process scandalous, not transparent enough and going against the national interests.

The SDL and SOP also expressed their dissatisfaction that the parliament passed a version of the Labor Code that they believed was less advantageous to employees. At this occasion the remaining governing parties (the SDKU, SMK and KDH) were joined by the HZDS to approve the final version. The left-right divide in the government was also clear in May 2002, when the cabinet refused to approve the European Social Code. As before, the SDL took a stance different from its coalition partners. The disagreements also emerged between the SDKU and the SDL over the issue of university fees, the former advocating its introduction, while the latter strongly opposing it. Eventually, the parliament passed a version of the law by which all forms of university education were free of charge.

A comprehensive analysis of the parties' economic programs is beyond the scope of this report and we can only briefly go over the manifest economic preferences of the individual parties. The HZDS 1998 party manifesto was a combination of some measures aiming at limiting the role of the state in economy with its opposition to privatization of what it called strategically important companies. Some observers claim this inconsistency has its roots in the economic policy that reflects only the interests of the party's major "clients", i.e. owners of companies that were privatized in the 1994-1998 period. The SNS advocated major state interventions to the economy, including among others extensive subsidies to various sectors of the industry. By these and related measures, the party wants to achieve what it calls a socially just economy. From the everyday rhetoric of the party representatives it is clear, however, that economic issues play only secondary role in its political

activities. The Christian Democrats advocate the introduction of the so-called "equal tax" (i.e. the abolition of the progressive taxation) and propose various social policy measures that would support (traditional) families. For the KDH, economic policies also seemed to be of secondary importance, since the party presents itself as a socially conservative force defending family, religion and ethno-national community. The SDKU economic views seem to be in line with economic liberalism: the party pledges to support private entrepreneurs, privatization and cuts in public expenditures. The newly founded ANO also claims it would support all measures aiming at improving the situation of small and medium size enterprises and try to limit public expenditures. Smer of Robert Fico, despite its insistence on "non-ideological pragmatic solutions" to everyday problems, is a party that advocates a strong role of the state in economy. Various measures that the party leaders approve include, among others, a limited price regulation in some areas, state financial support to export-oriented companies, and agricultural subsidies and other similar. The party criticized privatization of the natural monopolies on the basis that the state will loose important leverage for influencing economy. The SDL also adheres to traditional leftist agenda, including protection of employees' rights, state subsidies to agriculture, state ownership of major natural monopolies, etc. Given that the appeal of the SMK has been limited mostly to Slovakia's Hungarian minority and the region it lives, the party manifesto gives little concrete examples of economic policies. However, the SMK in the Dzurinda cabinet of 1998-2002 acted as a reliable supporter of the SDKU economic ministers' proposals.

Even though parties display often different economic policy preferences, the left-right divide has not been the crucial cleavage of the Slovak politics. Thus, to detect possible patterns of cooperation between the political parties, we also have to analyze their stances in other areas of public life.

3.2 Parties and the Reform of Public Administration

The government program (manifesto) approved in 1998 considered a reform of the public administration one of the most important projects of the new cabinet. The differences between political parties were clearly manifested in their attitudes and actions towards this ambitious undertaking. As early as in February 1999 a position of the Government Plenipotentiary for Public Administration Reform was established, who was to prepare all necessary studies and materials for the cabinet. As it turned out, however, his position was rather weak and powers limited to effectively influence the outcomes of the whole process. The Plenipotentiary presented the so-called Strategy of the Administrative Reform in late 1999 and its theses were developed in the Conception of Decentralization, in which the number of the administrative regions to be created and powers of these self-governing units (as well as sequence of the decentralization process) were specified. The material was also endorsed by a cabinet meeting, with all parties of the government

agreeing with the proposals. Even though the Mečiar government of 1994-1998 approved a new administrative division of Slovakia into eight regions in 1996, no proposals as to the extent of decentralization and creation of self-governing bodies had been elaborated. Moreover, the new Dzurinda cabinet argued that the 1996 division of country was mistaken, stressing that the administrative regions and natural regions were not congruent and the new administrative centers were ill-defined. In June 2000, the cabinet meeting approved the proposal dividing Slovakia into twelve Higher Territorial Units (VUC), again with support of all the coalition partners. The proposal was also endorsed by the Association of Towns and Municipalities in Slovakia and by the Union of Slovak Towns. In February 2001 a comprehensive constitutional amendment was passed in the National Council (see above), by which regional governments were given constitutional status and guarantees. However, the number of the VUCs as well as their powers were to be specified by ordinary laws. These issues, however, turned out to divide the ruling coalition. Even though the Coalition Council (the highest body in which the coalition parties are represented to solve political problems) in March 2001 approved the proposal of the Government Plenipotentiary, the SOP and the SDL at their separate press conferences announced they preferred a different model, dividing the country into four regions (as it was the case before 1989) or retaining the existing structure of eight VUC established in 1996. At a following cabinet meeting in April 2001, the ministers representing the SDL voted against the Plenipotentiary's proposal (the same one they had already approved before) and the SOP-nominated ministers abstained from voting. Subsequently, the SDL representatives announced they would try to strike a deal with the opposition in the parliament. That was a rather surprising development, given the coalition partners had agreed they would not involve the opposition into their conflicts, and given the opposition HZDS and SNS consistently criticized any attempts to reform the public administration. In the parliamentary second reading of the bill in July 2001 the SDL and SOP backed the HZDS' proposal to form eight VUC; the SNS deputies also joined them. In the third reading, the SDKU deputies considered any public administration reform better than not starting it at all and agreed to support the eight VUC model too. Thus, only the KDH and the SMK voted against the proposal. The SMK subsequently announced that it would leave the coalition government if further laws related to decentralization had not been approved by the end of September. The coalition partners then agreed on a series of laws and these were approved by the votes of their parliamentary deputies, while the HZDS and SNS again heavily criticized the proposals but eventually abstained from voting. Thus, the SMK later stated it would remain in the government, as the public administration decentralization was successfully launched, even though the approved laws constituted what it called only a second best preference.

The SDKU representatives also stated they were not fully satisfied with the outcome. However, they said it was important the reform started at all, as they believed the process would thus prove

irreversible and no future political administration would dare to re-centralized the state. Thus, only the Christian Democrats claimed they were dissatisfied and portrayed themselves as the only defenders of the original "reformist" government proposal. The position of the SOP had been changing and its attitudes were rather inconsistent. Originally it supported the Plenipotentiary's model of decentralization and later backed the SDL positions. The SDL was clearly internally divided over the reform. Its leadership was not very much in favor of decentralization, as it is believed it would loose an efficient tool for satisfying its clientele in state administration. At the same time, however, the SDL-nominated local self-government officials supported an extensive decentralization of powers. The other opposition parties (the HZDS and SNS) were openly critical of any decentralization and new administrative division, arguing the process would lead to disintegration of the state. Similar statements were frequently issued by the leader of the Smer, Róbert Fico, who criticized the government for not preparing the decentralization process carefully and several times called for the withdrawal of the bill proposals from the parliament. Nevertheless, all the parties took part in the first regional elections that were held in December 2001. With the lowest turnout in Slovak history (taking into account parliamentary, municipal and presidential elections since 1990), the elections brought best results for the HZDS and the SMK, two parties with the most disciplined electorate. Given the majority electoral system, a whole range of pre-election coalitions emerged, typically combining the SDKU, SMK, ANO and KDH on the one side and the HZDS, Smer, SDL and SOP on the other. All parties however claimed that the pre-electoral coalitions for these regional elections did not give any clue for how the national coalition government would look like after the September 2002 elections. The regional self-governing bodies assumed some of their powers starting from January 1, 2002 and they will be gradually taking other ones from the state administration throughout the next years, as specified by the laws.

3.3 Parties and minorities

During the Mečiar government of 1994-1998, protection of ethnic minorities' rights regularly appeared on the list of major concerns over the state of democracy in Slovakia. The government, of which the Slovak nationalist from the SNS were a part, pursued policies that met with strong resistance both from the SMK party officials and from various cultural and educational organizations of the Hungarian minority. The EU Commission also repeatedly stated an unsatisfactory state of ethnic minority affairs in Slovakia in that period. The situation changed after the 1998 elections, when the Party of the Hungarian Coalition was invited to the coalition government of Mikuláš Dzurinda. One of the three SMK nominees in the cabinet has been in charge of the policies concerning human rights, minorities and regional development. Later in 1999 a new law on the use of minority languages was passed by the National Council. However, the relations

between the SMK and its coalition partners, especially the SDL, have not been easy. The SDL-nominated Minister of Agriculture refused to comply with the government program on possession of the so called unclaimed land (see above) and also refused to appoint several SMK's nominees to the Land Fund. The SMK representatives, frustrated by what they perceived as marginalization of their position, conditioned their support to the prepared constitutional amendments by fulfilling what they called vitally important measures (such as creation of an Education Faculty for Hungarian teachers and ratification of the Charter of Regional and Minority Languages). Later a compromise was found and these conditions were basically fulfilled, after which the SMK supported the constitutional revisions. Hungarian minority representatives were also highly critical of the process of the administrative decentralization. The law adopted in mid-2001 almost lead to their departure from the coalition (see below). When the Hungarian parliament in Budapest passed an Act on Hungarians Living in Neighboring Countries, a new wave of anti-Hungarian sentiments reopened in several Slovak parties. Not surprisingly, the SNS and PSNS were the leading forces in this respect, but even the KDH and Smer advocated measures that would prevent the implementation of the act in Slovakia. Moreover, during the first regional elections in December 2001, several Slovak parties (including the SDL, Smer and KDH) either refused to support leading Hungarian candidates or openly asked their voters not to vote for Hungarians. The position of HZDS has, as indicated in the previous chapter, slowly changed. As late as in early 2001, the HZDS leading representatives attacked the government on the ground of selling out national interests to Hungarians. Later, however, the HZDS took a more reconciling stance and Mečiar himself several times indicated his willingness to cooperate with the SMK in the post-election period, referring to identical ideological (conservative) positions of the two parties. The SDKU has probably been the only relevant party consistently supporting the SMK throughout the post-1998 period. In summer 2001, prime minister Dzurinda made his best to convince the SMK representatives not to leave the coalition government. The Beneš Decrees (issued shortly after the World War II, by which the principle of a collective guilt of all Germans and Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia was suggested) have not been a prominent issue of the Slovak-Hungarian relations. The SMK actually never opened the question of compensating the Hungarians for confiscation of their property, even though some Slovak politicians suggested that SMK only waited for a chance to do so. Nonetheless, in the party manifesto issued in May 2002 the party claims that "abolition of the consequences of the norms approved on the grounds of a collective guilt is one of the most important principles of the SMK". However, the party does not specify what exactly it means by the statement. There have been some speculations that the party would be satisfied with a parliamentary declaration condemning what is sees as injustice embodied in the decrees.

As the position of the Hungarian minority became more secure, another minority – Roma – started getting more attention. This was partly due to repeated attacks of the extreme right Skinheads on

the Roma, but the whole problem received an international dimension as tens of Roma families started asking for political asylum in various Western European countries. Even though most of these applications were rejected, there were instances when the Roma applicants were successful. Consequently, several EU countries temporarily reintroduced visa requirements for Slovak citizens. These measures only added to tensions in the relations between Roma and the rest of Slovakia's population. Even the EU Commission pointed to the situation of Roma minority in its regular reports (emphasizing especially difficult economic situation, low education, and instances of discrimination of the Roma population. With considerable help from EU funds, various measures aiming at addressing the most urgent needs of the Roma minority have been undertaken, however, it is clear that the process of improving the situation is a question of decades, and not just years. Even though the Roma problem has been among the top issues mentioned in the EU reports on Slovakia, none of the parties has yet presented any elaborated strategy to tackle the issue. Instead, verbal attacks of some of the party representatives on Roma in general were somewhat more frequent. As one may expect, the SNS and PSNS representatives took the lead, accusing of the Roma from frequent criminal offenses and mental incapacity to live normal life. An SNS representative also claimed that passports of Slovak citizens who try to be granted asylum in a foreign country should be taken away by the Slovak authorities. Robert Fico, the leader of Smer adopted a more sophisticated approach. He claimed in 2000 that Slovak citizens asking for a political asylum should loose their rights to receive social security benefits. Moreover, he proposed a law that would increase punishments for minor criminal offenses, as it was popular to believe that Roma population frequently engaged in these activities. Later, however, Fico abandoned these activities and did not pay much attention to the "Roma question". Other parties used considerably milder rhetoric, emphasizing the need to involve the Roma community leaders into solving the community's problems. Although the governing parties themselves rarely discussed the Roma problems in their party headquarters, the EU Commission praised the Slovak government for a considerable effort to improve the situation of the Roma minority.

3.4 Parties and accession to the EU and NATO

Since the independent Slovak Republic became a political reality on January 1, 1993, most of the country's political representatives claimed it was their top foreign policy priority to bring Slovakia to the European Union and NATO. Although it was the government of Vladimír Mečiar that officially asked for a membership in the EU in 1995, his government actually diverted Slovakia from the route to the Union and NATO. The period of 1994-1998 was marked by a strong and growing criticism of Slovakia from the EU officials. In general, EU criticism had focused around three broad policy issues: respect for the rights of the parliamentary opposition, protection of minority rights

and stability of institutions. Following two diplomatic démarches issued by the EU presidency and a number of warnings from representatives of the EU member states, Slovakia was not invited to the first group of candidate countries to open accession talks in 1998, nor did it receive an invitation to join NATO from the 1997 Madrid summit. After the new government was formed in 1998, the effort to catch up with the countries more advanced in the EU accession talks became one of the top priorities of the new administration. In 2000 Slovakia opened the negotiations and by the end of May 2002 it was able to conclude 24 out of 30 negotiated chapters.

At the same time, however, Slovak political subjects were remarkably silent on their positions toward Slovakia's future position in the EU. Very rarely they issued statements and comments on general EU affairs, usually remaining only at a general level claiming support to an early accession of the country to the EU. Indeed, all the relevant political parties declare to support the EU integration process, including the SNS (the latter with an unclear qualification that the country must be ready before it joins the EU). Not even the negotiation process with the EU representatives did provoke any substantial opinion exchanges between the parties. The only exception was Fico's disagreement with the country's obligation to close the Jaslovské Bohunice nuclear power plant. Fico stated that accession talks are being conducted at a very high speed and the conditions may not always be advantageous for Slovakia; he also accused the government of being to weak in the accession talks and suggested that if in the government after the elections, his party may consider reopening some of the negotiation chapters.

The only exception to an overall lack of reflection of the EU affairs was passing of a parliamentary Declaration on Cultural and Ethical Sovereignty of Member and Candidate States submitted to the National Council by the Christian Democrats. The declaration approved in January 2002 calls for the decision-making on culture, ethical question (like euthanasia, abortions etc.), family protection and other related issues to remain within the exclusive jurisdiction of the EU member states. The declaration received support across government-opposition divide, as most of the parliamentarians from the SDKU, KDH and SMK were joined by the opposition deputies from the HZDS, SNS and PSNS. The meaning of the declaration was largely a symbolic one, as the issues mentioned in the declaration are within the members states exclusive competence anyway, however, some observers argue that the parliamentary debate on the Declaration was the first comprehensive debate on the EU among Slovak political parties.

In 2001 the Slovak Foreign Ministry initiated a creation of the National Convent on the European Future of Slovakia, which is a forum of governmental and parliamentary officials as well as representatives of the academia, church, trade unions and other non-governmental institutions. Even there it became clear that Slovak political parties have not been able to develop any consistent and comprehensive view of the future role of Slovakia in the EU. The only exception (besides the above mentioned initiative of the KDH) was a position prepared by the Foreign Policy

Committee of the SDL, calling for a stronger position of the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice and for increasing EU powers in human and social rights protection. Remarkably silent has been Slovakia's electorally most successful party, the HZDS. The HZDS did not go beyond usual general support for the EU integration process. A part of the explanation, besides apparent lack of expertise, may be the party's effort to reassert itself as a credible partner by not making controversial statements, given the widespread EU criticism of the HZDS-led government in 1994-1998. Even after four years out of power, however, the HZDS remains a problematic party in the eyes of most western officials. Especially since the end of 2001, various EU and NATO countries representatives repeatedly stressed that the HZDS was a major obstacle to Slovakia's successful integration to the EU and NATO. Their message seems to be clear: Should the HZDS be in the next government, the EU and NATO would find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the Slovak Republic as its new member. Such a view was recently presented among others by the US Ambassador to Slovakia Ronald Weiser, the UK Ambassador to Slovakia Damian R. Todd, the vice-president of NATO Parliamentary Assembly Markus Meckel, the US Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns and the Speaker of the Belgian Senate Armand De Decker. Moreover, the Secretary General of NATO George Robertson stressed that that it was important the Slovak voters "voted for the parties that would be able to bring Slovakia to NATO and the EU". Most of the foreign officials did not see any changes to the HZDS credibility, even though its representatives did their best to present themselves as determined supporters of NATO since 2001. The SNS and its splinter PSNS are the only parties in Slovakia openly arguing against Slovakia's NATO accession. Other parties declare they will not endanger Slovakia's chances at the November 2002 NATO Summit in Prague by cooperating with the HZDS. Thus, from the viewpoint of Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO, the outcome of the 2002 elections will be decisive. Even though it seems the HZDS will receive a plurality of the votes, the government composition will be decided in what is likely to be complicated coalition negotiations. We now turn to describing the possible outcomes of these talks, given the positions of the parties expressed in their public statements.

3.5 Parties and the Post-Election situation

The main question of the upcoming elections of September 2002 is whether the HZDS will be able to persuade some of the political parties to form a coalition government together or whether a coalition of the rest of the parties will be set up to prevent the HZDS from returning to power. The positions of most the individual parties seems to be clear in this respect. The SDKU strictly ruled out any cooperation with the HZDS, as did the KDH. In 2001 the Christian Democrats proposed what they called "a Toleration Patent", a proposal of how the post-election constellation could look like. They suggested that the government should be formed by the center-right parties (the KDH, SDKU, ANO and SMK), supported from the outside by the Smer. The Slovak nationalists and

the HZDS should remain in opposition as parties without sufficient credibility. The leader of the ANO also repeatedly stressed his party would not form a government with the HZDS, and the leaders of the SMK stressed they did not trust Mečiar and his party and prefer a coalition government with the SDKU, KDH and ANO. Top leading officials of the HZDS, including Mečiar himself, as late as in December 2001 somewhat surprisingly claimed they would not try to form the government, should their party be perceived as an obstacle to the "Euro-Atlantic integration organizations". However, in early 2002 the party representatives tried to downplay the worries about HZDS not being accepted by the western officials and insisted the HZDS aimed at winning the elections and forming the government. Mečiar even visited the USA and upon his return to Slovakia claimed he did not encounter any signs of HZDS being and obstacle to Slovakia's accession to NATO. When addressing the delegates of his party's congress in April 2002, Mečiar stressed that the primary goal of his party was to win the elections and form a government. He mentioned his party would not support a minority cabinet and also added the SMK and the KDH were his most preferred coalition partners. However, he did not make it clear whether he himself would try to be present in the cabinet or whether the party would propose someone else. Most of the western representatives expressing concerns over the post-2002 election development stressed it was the HZDS as a whole, and not just its leader, they did not find acceptable. The same position is held by the SMK, KDH, SNO and SDKU. Since the HZDS ruled out any cooperation with the SNS (pointing out to the latter's campaign against NATO) and the SDL is highly unlikely to appear in the next parliament, the Smer of Robert Fico has been the only party not refusing openly a cooperation with the HZDS. Nonetheless, Fico repeated many times Mečiar could not be trusted and Smer would not cooperate with the HZDS led by Mečiar. Some observers read these expressions as saying Fico would work with the HZDS if Mečiar left active politics. However, a more appropriate explanation seems to be found in the overall political tactics of Robert Fico. Throughout the whole period after he founded his party, he tried to portray himself as a third force (between the HZDS and the current government). Among his supporters there are former voters of both the HZDS and the SDK. Fico probably believes that by obscuring his real preferences he can attract as many undecided voters as possible, as well as to "increase his value" in the post-election coalition bargaining. Even though it is very difficult to foresee the development after the September 2002 election, it seems to be quite unlikely that the HZDS will be a part of the future coalition government.

4. Appendixes

4.1 A list of Abbreviations

ANO   the Alliance of a New Citizen (Aliancia nového občana)

HZDS   the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko)

KDH   the Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie)

PSNS   the True Slovak National Party (Pravá Slovenská národná strana)

SDA   the Social Democratic Alternative (Sociálnodemokratická alternatíva)

SDK   the Slovak Democratic Coalition (Slovenská demokratická koalícia)

SDKU   the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia)

SDL   the Party of Democratic Left (Strana demokratickej ľavice)

SMER   Direction

SMK   the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (Strana maďarskej koalície)

SNS   the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana)

SOP   the Party of Civic Understanding (Strana občianskeho porozumenia)

SPP   Slovak Gas Industry (Slovenský plynárenský priemysel**)**

VPN/ODÚ   Public against Violence/ Civic Democratic Union (Verejnosť proti násiliu/ Občianska demokratická únia)

DÚ   the Democratic Union (Demokratická únia)

DS   the Democratic Party (Demokratická strana)

SZS   the Slovak Green Party (Strana zelených na Slovensku)

SDSS   the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (Sociálnodemokratická strana Slovenska)

ZRS   the Slovak Labor Union (Združenie Robotníkov Slovenska)

4.2 Electoral results in Slovakia 1990-1998 (elections to the National Council)

	1990 votes (%)	1990 seats (%)	1992 votes (%)	1992 seats (%)	1994 votes (%)	1994 seats (%)	1998 votes (%)	1998 seats (%)
VPN/ODÚ	29,34	32,00	4,04	–	–	–	–	–
KDH	19,20	20,66	8,88	12,00	10,08	11,33	–**	–
DÚ	–	–	–	–	8,57	10,00	–**	–
DS	4,39	4,66		–	–	–	–**	–
SZS	3,48	4,00	–	–	–*	–	–**	–
SDK	–	–	–	–	–	–	26,33	28,00
SDĽ	13,34	14,66	14,70	19,33	10,41*	12,00	14,66	15,33
SNS	13,94	14,66	7,93	10,00	5,40	6,00	9,07	9,33
ZRS	–	–	–	–	7,34	8,66	1,3	–
HZDS	–	–	37,26	49,33	34,96	40,66	27,00	28,66
SOP	–	–	–	–	–	–	8,01	8,66
SMK	8,66	9,33	9,71	9,33	10,18	11,33	9,12	10,00
other	7,65	–	21,52	–	13,06	–	4,51	–

Source: Statistics Office of the Slovak Republic

* In 1994 SDĽ formed together with SZS and SDSS the Common Choice coalition (Spoločná voľba)

** KDH, DÚ, DS, SZS together with the SDSS formed an electoral party (the SDK)

4.3 The Composition of Slovak Governments 1990-2002

	prime minister	cabinet formed	end of cabinet	party composition	status
1	Mečiar I	June 1990	March 1991	VPN-MNI-KDH-DS	simple majority
2	Čarnogurský	March 1991	June 1992	KDH-VPN-MNI-DS	simple majority
3	Mečiar II	June 1992	March 1994	HZDS-SNS	simple majority/minority
4	Moravčík	March 1994	November 1994	SDL-KDH-DU	minority coalition
5	Mečiar III	December 1994	October 1998	HZDS-ZRS-SNS	simple majority
6	Dzurinda	October 1998	–	SDK/SDKU-SDL-SMK-SOP-KDH	oversized

4.4 Electoral results to the Regional Assemblies – number of elected representatives per party (December 2001)

	Bratislava VUC	Trnava VUC	Trenčín VUC	Nitra VUC	Žilina VUC	B.Bystrica VUC	Košice VUC	Prešov VUC	**Toge ther**	Share (%)
HZDS	4	12	45	10	31	17	6	21	**146**	36,4
SMK	6	14	-	31	-	15	18	-	**84**	20,9
KDH	9	2	-	-	8	3	5	8	**35**	8,7
Smer	1	8	-	4	-	5	2	9	**29**	7,2
SDKÚ	13	-	-	-	-	2	4	7	**26**	7,0
SDĽ	-	-	-	4	4	4	8	5	**25**	6,2
ANO	8	-	-	-	-	1	3	1	**13**	3,2
DS	4	-	-	-	2	1	2	2	**11**	2,7
SOP	-	4	-	1	1	-	-	0	**6**	1,5
P SNS	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	**3**	0,7
SNS	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	**2**	0,5
Stred	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	**1**	0,2
KSS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	**1**	0,2
SDSS	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	**1**	0,2
Independent	1	-	-	-	3	1	8	5	**18**	4,5
Together	**46**	**40**	**45**	**52**	**52**	**49**	**57**	**60**	**401**	**100**

Of the eight (elected) Heads of the Regions (VUC), six were nominated by the HZDS, one by the KDH and one by the ANO.

Source: SME 7.12 2001

4.5 Support for selected parties in April and May 2002 according to various polling agencies

	May (Markant)	May (OMV)	May (Focus)	May (MVK)	April (Focus)	April (MVK)
HZDS	27,4	27,0	28,6	25,3	28,4	27,9
Smer	17,0	15,4	14,9	17,6	17,6	17,5
SMK	10,1	11,0	11,6	10,0	12,0	10,5
SDKU	11,4	9,4	8,3	8,7	9,3	7,9
ANO	10,9	8,5	9,7	8,7	7,4	9,0
KDH	5,7	7,1	5,1	7,1	5,1	5,4
SNS	4,2	5,6	6,5	5,9	4,7	5,2
SDL	1,9	2,5	2,1	2,4	2,0	2,3
SDA	2,9	3,8	3,6	3,3	–	2,9
PSNS	2,4	2,1	2,2	2,0	3,3	3,0
SOP	NA	NA	1,5	1,4	1,2	1,0

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