

# On the Causes of the Tense Slovak-Hungarian Relations

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## *Introduction*

**T**he tension in the Slovak-Hungarian relations, which has been exacerbated by some recent events, is actually conditioned by many long term problems. The current measure of the tension depends mainly on the policy of the Slovak and Hungarian governments, but it originates in long-standing and related unresolved questions that concern the bilateral relationship and the characteristics of which have not changed during the years:

- 1 At the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008, the Slovak government refused to acknowledge Kosovo's independence. They explained their official position on the issue with the situation of Hungarian minorities seeking autonomy and the possible establishment of a precedent in the international law. At the same time, parallel with the ambiguity of Kosovo's independence, the delegates of Hungarian Slovaks (Pál Csáky and Miklós Duray) repeatedly mentioned the question of autonomy.
- 2 During 2007 the EU offered for some of the new member states the opportunity to enter the Schengen Zone. As a result, border controls between Hungary and Slovakia ceased (this is the longest part of the Slovak border). As Ján Slotá, the chief spokesperson of the nationalists insisted (mentioning Hungarian and Slovak tanks), it would threaten the inviolability and the territorial sovereignty of Slovakia: Hungarians will have the opportunity to cross the border without any control and even seize the country in order to enforce the reunification of the Hungarian nation.
- 3 The third event sharpening the tension in the Slovak-Hungarian relations took place in the beginning of October 2008 when the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Kinga Góncz raised objections against the quality and the assimilationist intentions of textbooks used for Hungarian schools in Slovakia. However, it should be noted that the conflict did not begin in October, but in the beginning of 2007 when the

minister of education of the new government announced reforms with the purpose to implement changes in the educational system of Hungarian minorities.

- 4 Finally, these last events threaten to unleash a conflict between these nations. This mutual enmity is getting more intense. It should give rise to concerns that this enmity already manifests itself in nationalism in the football arena and the same time violence is acquiring "legality" or at least acceptance. The Slovak football matches are good opportunities both for Hungarians and Slovaks to express hostile feelings. (The team and fans of Dunaszerdahely DAC which represents Hungarian Slovaks in the national championship are exposed to the nationalism of Slovak football fans). This violence began at the end of October 2008 when Spartak Trnava played with DAC and continued on 1<sup>st</sup> November with the match of Slovan and DAC. But in this last match the hardcore of Hungarian football fans were also present. The organized provocation of Hungarian football fans evoked another provocation from Slovak riot-police. After these events the Hungarian-Slovak conflict was deepened by some other events: a demonstration in Budapest, Hungarian provocations, the border blockade of extremist Hungarians. Apparently, Hungary fell into the nationalist "trap" of the Slovak government: these extreme actions inside our borders threaten the situation of Hungarian Slovaks and render Hungarian ambitions more difficult on the international scene.

### *The nature of conflict*

The source of the conflict has two sides: the Slovak concern about territoriality and the Hungarian fear concerning the assimilation of Slovak Magyars. The tension manifests itself violently with symbolical acts at the level of high politics, but on the lower levels of society, an even on the level of low politics relation are more peaceful. (Conflicts between people are rarely heard of, and then only in the minority media.)

The situation in the society can be represented by surveys on the relationship of Slovak majority and Hungarian minority. These surveys have been made for two decades. From the results a long term trend can be drawn: about one third of the Slovak majority has hostile feelings and another one third is rather dismissive of Hungarian minorities and their claims, while the rest of the population is rather appreciative, even supportive towards them.

Hungarian-Slovak relations will remain a difficult issue of Hungarian foreign policy. This troublesome relation is influenced negatively by a profound Slovak mistrust and the manifestations of Hungarians' contempt- pride in their culture, mockery of Slovak language etc. Slovak politicians often claim that Hungarians do not treat them as equal partners and they usually compensate for it in different ways. Hungarians, their lan-

guage at phonetics are also often ridiculed; Slovak Magyars speaking with an accent or making grammatical errors are mocked as “clowns” of their country. Slovak nationalism in this much is largely linguistic in character, more so than being rooted in ethnicity.

Slovak mistrust against Hungarians is based on experiences of the past. (It is often mentioned that Hungary attacked Slovakia several times, this series beginning either with the Hungarian conquest, or with the end of the First World War, and including the “minor war” during the era of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the First Vienna Award, and leading up to the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.) These experiences are emphasized in Slovak society through education and other mechanisms for the transmission of culture. Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mistrust and condemnation have infiltrated Slovak national identity. That is the reason why these often overshadow any form of rational arguments concerning the relationship with Hungary and it explains the irrational antipathy in Slovak society. The past and recent Slovak leadership who facilitate the creation and enhancement of national identity represents the following ideas: Slovaks are those who are not Hungarians, Slovaks have a mythical antipathy towards Hungarians and Hungarians are ‘misfortune’ of Slovakia.

## *Permanent causes of tension*

### *1. Existence and claims of Hungarian minority*

As long as Hungarian minorities are living in Slovakia, their status will not be normalized, or, as it is often said in Slovakia, “standardized”. The tension can grow or can be nurtured anytime, especially in the expectation of certain material benefits and political capital in both countries. The existence of a Hungarian minority will remain an important and problematic issue for the Slovak policy until they have the capability to organize themselves politically and municipally, safeguard their interests, and intervene in Slovak policy-making processes both at the regional and the national levels.

Slovak nationalists often object that the problem is not with the Hungarians in Slovakia, but with their political delegates (recently: politicians and MPs of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition). Since the beginning of the 1990's the Slovak National Party has voiced the intention of excluding the political parties of Hungarians from the Parliament and Slovak political life, obliging them to swear a loyalty oath, and achieving their removal from public life for various reasons and through various acts (e.g., the new state-defense act). Even Robert Fico, the Social Democratic Prime Minister of Slovakia claims that the source of the problem and the biggest enemy of the Slovak-Hungarian relationship is Pál Csáky, the head of the Party of Hungarian Coalition and his party itself.

The existence of the Hungarian minority touches on the territory and the integrity of the new, sovereign Slovak republic created only two decades ago. (It should be noted that

this belated national development was caused by Hungarians and Czechs.) The political leaders and nationalists claim a country peopled uniquely with Slovaks, even if 10% of the population is Hungarian (other minorities, except for the Roma, are insignificant in numbers). As long as “restless” and “irredentists” Hungarians have a legal claim to profit from any of the state’s linguistic, cultural, educational or municipal institutions and acts, they fear a Hungarian menace to their territorial integrity. Claims for autonomy, therefore, constitute a chief crime. They also fear that autonomy will imply the right to put territorial affiliation to a referendum and will lead to the separation of the territory.

## 2. *Slovak territorial concerns*

The next cause of the conflict is the consequence of the first one: concerns about territorial integrity. It originates from the experience that Slovaks living or visiting the southern part of the country bump into Hungarian communities who speak Hungarian and have a Hungarian way of life. It annoys not only nationalists, but many other Slovaks as well, even though most of the Hungarians living there do speak Slovak.

It must be noted that long term surveys prove that those Slovaks who belong to a mixed, Hungarian-Slovak community are more accommodating towards Magyars than those who only meet Hungarians occasionally.

The conflict over the hydroelectric plant at Bós and the illegitimate diversion of the Danube is related to these concerns. The unilateral decision of Slovakia on the construction of the hydroelectric plant in 1992, surprising Czechs and Hungarians alike, was also motivated by the desire to secure the Slovak-Hungarian border which was seen as becoming “uncertain”. The objections of the Hungarian partner and the refusal to carry on with construction works was interpreted as arrogance. Beyond nationalism-tinged arguments, on the Slovak side, the decision to build the power station was further explained by reference to the energy needs of the country and the huge amount of money already invested into it.

The continuous debate on the plant not only exacerbates the tensions between the countries but also cause serious environmental effects on the Hungarian side. As a minimum, the silent compromise of the Hungarian partner will be needed to arrive at any reasonable long term arrangement.

## 3. *The assimilation of Hungarian minorities*

The above analyzed dilemma of the Slovak collective identity needs to be addressed. The proposition of the Slovak political class is the fastest possible mass assimilation of Magyars. This arrogant pressure for assimilating Slovak Magyars is the third and also the current cause of the problems between Hungary and Slovakia.

In the background of these ambitions, there is an unconscious sense of guilt that during the years of 1918-20 territories were attached to the country which had been popu-

lated by other nationalities. For their conscience's sake, they try to prove with extensive apparatus that Slovaks arrived far before Hungarians in the territory.

Slovak politicians use the instrument of assimilation in a democratic framework to achieve the disappearance of Hungarians from Southern Slovakia. They try to establish such social, educational and administrative conditions which provide incentives for Hungarian communities to move away. The problems are only exacerbated when Hungarians protest (i.e. resist assimilation) and ask Hungary's help against unjust acts, measures and laws.

#### *4. The protection of Slovak sovereignty*

Hungarian political moves to secure the rights of minorities are interpreted as Magyar arrogance and an offense against sovereignty. As far back as the drafting and ratification of Slovak-Hungarian Bilateral Agreement in 1995/96, the Slovak position was that Slovak Magyars are Slovak citizens belonging to the sovereign Republic of Slovakia. As a result, their situation is an exclusive issue of Slovak internal policy, Hungary has no legitimacy to get involved, nor do Magyars living in Slovakia have any rights asking for foreign help. They see the question of dual citizenship, the act on the status of Hungarian minorities living in the neighboring countries, and Kinga Göncz's intervention in the issue of textbooks used for Hungarian schools in Slovakia as a series of insults against Slovak national and state identity.

The concerns about territorial and state sovereignty are the reason why many Slovaks fear the abolishment of border control between Hungary and Slovakia. They claim that Hungarians will have the opportunity to cross the border without any control (or even conspire against Slovakia).

The same fear appears when some Slovak voices, although mainly only nationalists, opposed the construction of bridges over the Danube and the Ipoly and any other border-river. Nationalist politicians claimed that Hungarians could use these bridges to invade Slovakia, while the less extreme warned that Hungarian purposes are "unpredictable".

This is the reason why the Slovak government often refuses to support regional and cross-border cooperation. (It must be noted that it does not appear directly, but in project approvals and rejections.) In this cooperation usually Hungarians take part from both side of the border.

The Slovak political elite has unanimously objected to the acceptance of any Hungarian claims concerning cultural, educational and language issues for almost 20 years. They claim that Hungarians benefit from extra privileges as it is. They are convinced that no one has the right to determine the rights of Slovak Magyars, except for the Slovak government, so they do not involve anybody in the decision-making process. (Ján Slota and his party also claim that existing rights of Slovak Magyars must be reduced by 20 %.)

## *Interpretation of the current tension*

### *1. Characteristics of the Slovak government coalition*

Last time it was under the third Mečiar government, between 1994 and 1998, that Slovak-Hungarian relations were as tense as they are today. One of the coalition members of the cabinet was the Slovak National Party, sustained by distrust against Magyars and minorities in general, who gave the ministers of education and security. The dispute of October 2008 has already begun in the summer of 2006 when the Fico government came into power. (It must be taken into consideration that the incident of Malina Hedvig happened in August 2006.) The Slovak National Party, always bent on cultivating mistrust against Hungarians in the government, got the ministry of education and the ministry of construction and regional development, so it had the money coming from EU funds at its disposal. In the summer of 2006 the new prime minister made a promise that the status quo of Slovak Magyars would not be violated. Since then, politicians from the government have frequently attacked these rights.

Slovakia's main coalition, the most socially embedded as regards societal preferences of all democratic governments, is dominated by both left-wing and right-wing nationalists and populists. This is true even if Fico often mentions that Slota is not a member of the coalition, but it should be also noted that the coalition council made up of the three leaders of the coalitional parties (Robert Fico, Ján Slota, Vladimír Mečiar) do have regular meetings and make preliminary decisions.

The source of the aggravated situation of this year was the announcement by the prime minister about the year of national identity. Slovak politicians often benefit from the fact that one of the basic pillars of national identity is the mistrust against Hungarians. As the deteriorating relationship between the two countries appears mainly on the level of governments, politicians have the intention to exacerbate this relation, projecting it onto the level of society as well. Determination and maintenance of the image of the enemy is an important political instrument to gain popularity and material benefits.

So worsening Hungarian-Slovak relations become an important matter of internal affairs (which is often emphasized by politicians of both country), and this is the reason why the improvements are not stimulated by any inner intentions but by external expectations (from the European Socialists in the EP or by the European Union in general).

The Slovak political elite (including both the government and opposition) is not mature enough to alleviate the tension or make it disappear from national identity, and they have no intention as they take advantage of the hostility against the Hungarians.

The government of Robert Fico always blames Hungary for the tense situation. Fico often mentions that highlighting these problems is an instrument for Hungary to distract attention from its internal problems. (He often says that Hungarians have real



problems only with themselves or with their own government, and that Hungarians – especially the Fidesz-MPP party – represent a danger for Europe.)

But it is nevertheless the Slovak prime minister who distracts attention from the internal and external problems of his coalition with insults and the maintenance of hostility against Hungarians, resorting to the tactic according to which offense is the best defense. And he can also rely on Ján Slota, the head of the Slovak National Party who always insults Hungarians when the tension decreases. It is quite suspicious. Slota is a goon of the Prime Minister that he can use whenever it suits his interests. Indirect evidence also points at their cooperation in this matter.

The prime minister tries to assign Slotas's insults to his alcoholism. This shames, however, the whole Slovak society and political elite and also gives rise to suspicions, since this way Slota's dubious state of mind is allowed to become a characteristic of the whole Slovak coalition. Slota's drunken discourse, or "subculture" is treated as an "inner Slovak folklore" even by Hungarians. Fico may be ashamed by the statements of his coalition partner too, but if so, he certainly does not reveal it, rather he defends him with all means and presents the Slovak government coalition to Europe as a democratic and well-organized one.

## *2. Actions and reactions in October 2008*

The tension between the two countries worsened because of the following events and intentions:

1. The minister of construction and regional development (Marián Janušek, Slovak National Party) omitted Hungarians schools from current projects and did not provide them money from European funds for renovation.

2. Ján Mikolaj, the minister of education (from the same party and a politician who feels that Hungarians should use their native language only in their country) introduced a series of reforms. Hungarian textbooks were published which break not only Hungarian but also Slovak grammatical rules: place-names were given in Slovak but with Hungarian suffixes. (Before these books, names were marked in Hungarian.) This is an insult against not only the textbooks but also the Hungarian language and minorities, and at the same time, the manifestation of concerns for territorial sovereignty: in the territory of Slovakia Hungarian geographical names cannot be used, because these places are no longer a part of Hungary, but of sovereign Slovakia.

According to Pál Csáky, the head of the Party of Hungarian Coalition (MKP), both ministries provoke Hungarians. The minister of construction and regional development denies that he omitted Hungarian schools from projects - exact data are not available - while the minister of education claimed that he proceeded according to standard procedural rules. He also claims that Hungarian schools gained too many benefits from the past government because the ex-minister was the member of MKP.

Not only the MKP (Party of the Hungarian Coalition), but also the Hungarian foreign ministry protested. The main points of the MKP's protest were to withdraw the textbooks full of mistakes, to publish new textbooks with correct Hungarian geographical names (and then names in Slovak in brackets) and to name the people responsible for the situation. Neither ministers nor the vice-president responsible for the minorities agreed. They claimed that Hungarian names should follow Slovak ones, because the Slovak language enjoys priority even in Hungarian textbooks. They suggested many different solutions to solve the problem, but it was clear that their only purpose was to enforce the priority of Slovak language.

The reason for their intention for assimilation in the field of education was the idea of full-scale citizenship: if Slovak Magyars study in Hungarian, they will never learn the native language of the country.

3. The Forum of Magyar Members of Parliaments of the Carpathian Basin also embarrassed Slovak politicians. They feared that Hungary has the intention of developing legal relations (such as the act on the status of Hungarian minorities living in the neighboring countries) with Slovak Magyars and the delegates of MKP who are the MPs in the Slovak legislature. On 5 November 2008, the Slovak parliament condemned the delegates of MKP. They protested that the delegates who swore an oath to defend the Slovak constitution, serve the Hungarian Parliament which is an act of disloyalty against the Republic of Slovakia. They also criticized that these MPs took part in the Forum, which discussed the question of autonomy. Furthermore, they accused Pál Csáky that he negotiated with László Tókécs about this same question.

It must be noted that the delegates of MKP have been talking about the questions of municipality, territorial, cultural and educational autonomy for 18 years. They have no united stance or program concerning autonomy; they use the question for enforcing their momentary political interests. If they had drafted a consistent claim for autonomy, and had promoted these claims, it would have been a clear point to the public.

4. In order to ease the tension and solve the problems, the foreign ministers of the two countries, Kinga Göncz and Ján Kubiš agreed to a revision of the clauses of the Slovak-Hungarian Bilateral Agreement signed in 1995 and ratified in 1996 in Slovakia with regard notably to the work of the 11 joint committees. But Kubiš cannot withdraw the defective textbooks and as a result made no such promise. His authority over the members of the government responsible for the worsening Slovak-Hungarian relationship is next to nonexistent, as evidenced by the events of the last two years.

The two foreign ministers interpreted the task of revision in a quite different way. Although Hungarians suggested only a check-up of the clauses of the agreement and the compliance with it, the Slovak foreign minister, with the support of the Slovak media, interpreted it as the revision of the agreement. This rhymes with the long-standing desire to remove the Council of Europe Recommendation 1201 which makes the asso-



ciation of local governments and municipals on territorial base possible, which, in the Slovak interpretation, carries within itself the beginnings of a territorial autonomy.

However, a number of non-compliances of the treaty can be detected on both sides, especially as regards the functioning of the joint committees. The vice-president responsible for minorities, Dušan Čaplovič claims that Hungary violates the clause on good neighborly relations, where the recommendation for the annual meeting of prime ministers is included. He also claims that the rights of Slovak minorities in Hungary are violated, as no money is provided for the publication of their journal and for their radio station in Pilisszentkereszt. This reveals the need of check-up on the performance of obligations deriving from the agreement in both countries.

### *Prospects of problem resolution*

To solve these problems and to ease the tension is not an easy task in either countries. In short term no amelioration can be expected since both countries carry a significant degree of historical trauma directed against each other. Hungary has to face the difficulties and limited prospects of Hungarian foreign policy in order to be able to manage the situation of Hungarian Slovaks who fall within the jurisdiction of the Slovak policy-making. Slovaks have to face not only the problems of a Hungarian minority, but also their own fears and concerns. The resolution of the problem is urgent, but it can only be realized in middle- and long-term processes with the help of internal and external factors.

#### *1. External support for the problem resolution: the EU, the Council of Europe, the PES*

The following question has been often posed: how is it possible that two countries, both members of the European Union and the NATO are in such a hostile relationship? Hungarians often ask why the EU does not help the situation of Slovak Magyars. But their relationship has only recently been arranged by the Slovak-Hungarian Bilateral Agreement of 1995/96. This made launching the accession process possible in the first place. The document assigned the protection of minorities in Slovakia to the Council of Europe Recommendations and various European charters supervised by the Council of Europe. Signing these agreements was a prerequisite for carrying on the negotiations about joining the EU and the NATO, but both countries could decide to some extent about the terms of joining these.

The EU has no common and binding legal document to regulate the situation of minorities. And it cannot be expected that either the EU or the EP will make and ratify such kind of document since most of the member states have to deal with the problem

of increasing numbers of immigrants and are thus negatively inclined towards legislation on minorities.

In Europe the only organization that deals seriously with the resolution of the problem is the PES, the Party of European Socialists. However, the tension started to exacerbate in the middle of 2006 when both in Hungary (Hungarian Socialist Party, MSZP) and Slovakia (Social Democratic Party of Slovakia, Smer-SD), socialist parties were in government. The reason for the permanent tension was that the Slovak National Party with its extreme hostility towards Hungarians joined the coalition and came to power with the forming of the government. It is the Smer and Robert Fico who is responsible for it above all, but the PES has also responsibility because the party agreed to maintain the socialist-nationalist coalition even if it is against the rules and ideas of the party. The leaders of the PES (Hannes Swoboda, J. Marinus Wiersma) actually are more sensitive to the international consequences of this coalition than the Slovak prime minister; as a result they tend to put pressure on Fico's party when his coalition partners outrage international public opinion. This happened on 29 October 2008, when they forced the MPs of Smer to vote against the newly introduced textbooks.

Even if the pressure put by the PES on the Slovak prime minister and his party is less efficient than Hungary would hope or like, the Party of European Socialists has the only active role in problem resolution. They also forced a formal meeting between the prime ministers of the two countries.

However, because of the abusive statements of Slota, the Hungarian prime minister refused any such meeting despite the invitation of Fico and the demands of the PES. Until Fico cannot arrange this meeting (the PES expects not only one, but several), allowing him to present it as a new trophy, not only Slota, but the prime minister himself, if in more restrained terms, will be able to continue their mockery and slander.

### *Internal factors of problem resolution: mutual gestures from society (and governments)*

We often expect a solution from outside for these problems, but it should be considered that the only possible solution is an internal agreement. The chief actors of problem resolution must be the Slovak and the Hungarian society, but they do not really realize their task. Because governing parties are changing almost every four years and they usually refuse to manage resolution processes and because the nature of relationship depends on the current governments, society (especially intellectuals) and the government should find a solution together for the problem.

It is the task of intellectuals to make a strategy which is able to ease the tension between Hungarians and Slovaks in a long term. This strategy should be based on mutual acts and political groups should be involved if possible.

One example for these mutual acts was when in the summer of 2008 Slovak intellectuals offered a petition to the Slovak police and prosecutor for a new investigation in the case of Hedvig Malina. They also presented a petition against the introduction of the new textbooks on 25/26 October (Fair-Play). It is a fact that most of the problems appear in Slovakia, but the Hungarian society and politics should also make a move.

### *What can we do?*

Even if the tension can be eased by considerate acts of society and political leaders in the short term, in the long term only a detail-oriented and carefully constructed strategy can help. In order to work out and realize such strategy, those Slovaks and their delegates who accept the existence and the right to live of the Hungarian minority must also be included in the process. The strategy must contain plans for different forums and discussions about the current problems and its roots in the past. Technical discussions for professionals and open debates in public and in the media should be launched and all the factors of the current problem and the tense relationship - even at the expense of verbal confrontation - should also be defined. Beyond the mediation of the media, an institution should be involved which takes over these tasks, organizes, leads and improves them. The institutional framework of problem resolution between Hungary and Slovakia should be worked out.

If Hungary is determined to improve the tense relations with Slovakia, she has to consider all the incidents and events in the country which can give rise to fear among Slovaks. Hungary has to take into consideration the factual and other reasons of Slovak objections and sensibility (the right extremist Hungarian Guard, insulting statements by Hungarian politicians concerning the Slovak issues, the nature of contempt mentioned above, the situation and the claims of the Slovak minorities in Hungary and their parliamentary delegation).

The current Slovak government (and their supporters from the society) does not want and will not accept the fact that they are responsible for all the statements and actions of their coalition partners. Hungarian policy-making – despite its limited means – has the task to make them realize its importance and necessity.

Hungary has to resolutely claim minority rights assured by the Slovak constitution, the language law dealing with minorities, and the Slovak-Hungarian Bilateral Agreement. But only if Hungarian politics entirely fulfills its own commitments, can all the claims be legitimate.