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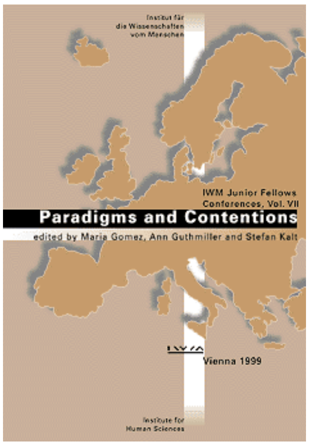
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Main Trends in Slovakia's Political System

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Introduction

In recent years, Slovakia's development (in ways similar to other post-socialist countries) has been characterized by politics and policies designed to cope with the challenge of building both a functional economy and a representative democracy. Most of the problems facing young Central and Eastern European democracies were produced by their former regimes. Viewed in this way, research into the transition process is an exciting effort which can shed light on many events of recent years. "Many" is the right word, because we cannot account for all of the events. We cannot do this, and we will focus not on turning points or ruptures, but on historical continuities, affinities, and overlaps – a strategy which is likely to yield a richer crop and facilitate a better grasp of the distinctions and distinctiveness of the different countries which will be studied. Each nation has its own *differentia specifica*, best comprehended through an appreciation of the details of both its past and present development. Equally, each country finds its own way towards becoming a stable democratic regime. This path necessarily assumes a distinctive shape, one which reflects the particular circumstances of its development. My ambition is to portray one such disrupted and eventually resumed historic-political continuum, taking as an example, my country Slovakia, which not long ago began to defy the "textbook" development of other Central European nations. Because Slovakia cannot be pigeonholed, it is a suitable object for the analysis which I intend to carry out.

Slovak political tradition

For a long time, Slovakia's political life was visibly affected and crippled by the Slovaks' limited capacity to exercise genuine autonomy. A history of subordination to foreign powers pushed the issue of the country's national status to the forefront of its political life and rendered it central to the discourse on domestic politics as well. Even so, it must be recognized that the issues of political empowerment and political representation have long been part of the national consciousness. Although they were quite inchoate in the period prior to 1918 (the formation of the common state of the Czechs and the Slovaks, Czechoslovakia), they acquired greater determinacy and urgency in the years preceding World War II (WWII), and retained their vitality even under the fetters of Communist rule. Seen in this light, the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993 was not so unexpected and abrupt.

The absence of any institutional framework for the activities of the Slovak political elite could be seen as a romanticized style of its politics, politics largely impractical and remote from the exigencies of real life. Slovak political imagination became preoccupied with the idea of a people as a viable factor on which to pin national hopes. Therefore, it is safe to insist that a clearly nationalistic program was the hallmark of modern Slovak politics in its early beginnings, its patriotic values providing the glue which was to bind the Slovak polity together (Pichler, 1998). But the very same all-inclusive, nationalistic program made it difficult to discern different political currents (with their respective priorities and emphases) which had become part and parcel of the Slovak political scene.

This handicap did not prevent Slovak political life, even at its very beginning, from developing and displaying an inner heterogeneity which promised further differentiation. This is supported by the fact that as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the presence of different political parties was so conspicuous that it necessitated the creation of a decision-making body (Lipták, 1992) to coordinate their policies prior to WWI. This period saw the formation of the Catholic party (with its predominantly nationalist agenda), an agrarian movement, and a Social-Democratic platform, as well as the inchoate Liberal party. Indeed, it is safe to say that the country’s political landscape was as varied as that of other Central European countries.

There was an upsurge of political activity in Slovakia following the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The birth of this common state triggered the consolidation of political parties (which lost no time in organizing themselves along commonly accepted lines). These steps led to some remarkable progress in the formation of an institutionalized party system when compared to the pre-1918 period. The time between the two World Wars was marked by the gradual stabilization of the established political alignments, as well as a reduction in their numbers. For the sake of a better understanding of the Slovak political process, it is essential to realize that, despite the vigorous development of Slovakia’s political system, most Slovak political parties of the inter-war period were not ruling ones. Typically, they would oppose the central government, headquartered in Prague. In other words, the bulk of the Slovak political elite had no experience in the process of "coalition making,” in the ruling of a nation, and in decision-making for vital areas of national life. Perhaps a great many events, including those of the most recent past, should be interpreted in light of this lack of experience. Indeed, its immaturity is what sets Slovakia apart from those nations which have long been in control of their national and international affairs.

It is no surprise then that the established political system collapsed after the events following the declaration of an independent Slovak state and the beginning of WWII. The war years saw an almost forcible removal of political adversaries by one dominant political party (HSL’S, or Hlinka’s People Party). The political model and culture introduced by this party deliberately favored a pattern of centralized leadership with a strong ruler, the suppression of democratic "prejudice," and the fusion of the democratic party with the state power machine. This one-party Slovak State ended in 1944, when democratic and communist forces organized an armed revolt.

The post-war revitalization of a relatively liberal national life gave birth to another political pattern: namely, the creation of a bipartisan system featuring the two major political alignments of those days (civic and communist). As a democracy, it was seriously deficient because the third major political force of that period - a formerly dominant Catholic-nationalistic one - was suppressed and eventually banned. This period of crippled democracy ended in the marginalization of public sector bodies (civil society), their exclusion from official political representation, and the subsequent re-establishment of a one-party system. The Communist Party was the only ruling power. Political decision-making at the national level again assumed an explicitly and overtly partisan character. The governments formed by this party, as we know all too well, were not ones which sought consensus or practiced inter-party consultations. The radical policies pursued by successive Communist governments calculated to weaken the role of any parties or institutions which might act as a countervailing power to central, partisan authorities.

Political parties in Slovakia and social cleavages

The evolution and competition of political parties in Slovakia were by no means random processes. Instead, they reflected the social-cultural character of the country. Decades before, Slovak society had been distinguished by certain patterns of conflict which defined the basic contours of factional fighting. Despite four decades of Communist rule which substantially modified the social structure of Slovakia, some of these conflicts re-surfaced after the events of 1989. This happened in some remarkable ways, especially when a political party which made its appearance following 1989 did not automatically root itself in the pre-war tradition or display any inclination to do so. For all its apparent disinterest in seeking and promoting continuity, a closer look at its agenda reveals a legacy of cleavages which linger in Slovak society up to the present. Indeed, an outline of the main demarcation lines furnishes a brief but revealing catalog of the major political issues which used to be discussed in Slovakia, issues which have a tendency to return, even if in new guises. The main divisions which have cut through Slovak society include:

1*) Sectarian Divisions.* Slovak society is composed of Catholics and Protestants. Simplifying drastically, it could perhaps be said that Catholic worshippers gave more support to state-building policies in the period preceding 1918, while the Lutheran population proved to be the vehicle and promoter of statehood in the inter-war period. Because Slovakia is presently a more or less secularized society, this split now appears to be no more than a chapter in the country's history. Yet, though not the leading force, religious loyalties – regardless of which they are – continue to exert a significant influence.

2) *Traditionalism vs. Modernism.* This split has always loomed large in Slovakia's national life, and it seems to have lost none of its centrality. Slovakia has always been a country where tradition is venerated, and even today the nation retains a traditional character. In Slovak history, the dispute between modernization and traditionalism has taken on many forms, exemplified most tellingly in the attitude of the Slovaks to the Czech Republic and to radical economic reform. Most recently, the

traces of the notorious Slovak traditionalism are identifiable in the domestic misgivings about Slovakia’s NATO and EU integration and in the inflated integrationist rhetoric of Slovakia's "Euro-skeptics.” Debates about Slovakia’s future in Europe have become central to the tensions in its most recent politics.

3) *Free market vs. Centrally planned economy*. Last but not least, a line separates those who pursue the principles of the free market economy (and who would like to see the central government more disengaged from the economy) from the supporters of centrally controlled economic life. This cleavage seems to most accurately reflect the differences between the policies of the right and the left (Krivý, 1997). It remains the fiber of Slovakia’s political system, even if its strands cut into one another or overlap. Protestants, for example, did not assume the mantle of a "one nation" Protestantism. Rather, they included both liberal and conservative proponents of Slavic unity.

Both the Slovak modernist left and the conservatives among the Christian-socialists have responded to the question of how to control the market. Overall, however, the key political development of the period between 1918 and 1948, as well as of the years following the events of 1989, has been the institutionalization of relatively clear-cut alignments which mirror the major, persisting cleavages shaping the social and political profile of Slovak society.

Slovakia’s belated modernization

Another of Slovakia’s distinctive characteristics is its belated modernization. This can be seen, for example, in the growth patterns of the country’s urban population. The time lag in this area (when compared to the European average) is as much as 55 years (Pašiak 1998). In 1920, Slovakia’s urban population was only 18.5 % above the European average of 46.2% (for the purposes of this study, "Europe" excludes Russia). The thesis of belated modernization is further confirmed by the structural patterns of Slovak society. Above all, modernization tends to create its own cleavages between the core and the periphery, between urban and rural populations; it also aggravates existing divisions, for example, emphasizing the relevance of confessional allegiances (Lipset, 1990). Thus, it is useful to view the main cleavages of Slovak society in the light of Slovakia's belated modernization. The "core-periphery" problem, however, assumes a very peculiar character and significance and thus deserves elaboration. The position of Slovakia as a whole within Hungary, as well as later within Czechoslovakia, used to be that of "periphery without its own core,” which *de facto* affected, if not crippled, Slovakia’s modernization pattern. In other words, Slovakia did not really benefit from the prosperity or power accrued by the multinational state structures which it was a constituent of. As a result, Slovakia failed to develop any consistent tradition of pre-modern nation-building. Hence there has always been a gap between the loyalties of citizenship and those of national identity. Furthermore, it simply failed to create one indivisible center. Slovakia's separate regions exhibit imbalances and differences in "values," in trends of partisan affiliations, and in political allegiances and identifications. On the face of it, it would appear that the absence of a clearly defined geographical core simply reflects a much deeper ambiguity concerning the notion of a "center" in the broader perspective of national institutions and ideologies, that is, concerning the definition of the country's substantial values and orientations. Thus, what would seem to be a merely territorial issue becomes fundamental to a proper understanding of the country's political tradition and culture. A key component of any national value system is an affirmative approach to central authority (Shils, 1982). This approach requires, above all, the existence of commonly accepted values, values which are simply taken for granted. These values acquire an official seal: their violation is perceived as a political scandal.

Belated modernization explains, first, why nation (state)-building issues are still put at the top of the political agenda of many groups and alignments in Slovakia; secondly, the specific character of Slovak modernization highlights the absence of a tradition of coalition-building. The divisions in the Slovak community complicate the search for political agreement. In plain words, Slovak political culture and tradition lack, for reasons which have been indicated above, the kinds of values which facilitate fruitful cooperation in decision-making.

Developments on the Slovak political scene in 1989-1998

For the sake of convenience, it is useful to break down this span of time into several periods.

1. Founding period, November 1989 – June 1990

During this time, Slovak citizens began to enjoy new political freedoms. At the same time, however, the key attribute of a democratic regime was missing, i.e., a government whose legitimacy stems from competitive elections. In the very same period in Slovakia, a constitutional framework for pluralistic political elections was created, one which remains effective up to the present date. Thus, the first competitive elections in June 1990 mark the end of this period.

2. Transitional period, June 1990 – 1993

The 1990 elections confirmed Slovak society's commitment to political and economic change. Pro-reform alignments won by a wide margin, while the Communist Party of Slovakia gained just 13.3 % of the national vote (and thus became an opposition party, along with the newly formed nationalist Slovak Party with 13.9%)

This period is distinguished by instability and political turmoil. The political life of the country was one of constant re-alignment. The cabinet was reshuffled several times. The demise of the most influential post-1989 political movement, VPN (Public Against Violence), was followed in 1993 by the dissolution of Czechoslovakia – the common state of the Czechs and the Slovaks. Economic reform came to be the theme which dominated the discourse on domestic policies. The opposition parties and movements criticized its rapid pace, as well as the indiscriminate mimicking of the steps taken by Slovakia's former national bedmate (now the Czech Republic). These steps, the opposition argued, were inappropriate for and detrimental to the Slovak economy. Then. in the latter part of the period under discussion, this theme metamorphosed (in a piecemeal and almost unnoticed manner) into the issue of the quality and status of relations between the Slovak and Czech Republics.

Around this time, Slovakia displayed a conspicuously different pattern in the development of its political system compared to its neighbors, where the political scene was comprised of conventional political parties vying with each other to affirm themselves and their programs. In Slovakia, however, this period witnessed the advent of a broad center movement which quickly became dominant (Meseznikov, 1997). Consequently, although Slovakia was still regarded as one of the Vysegrad Four nations (a political and economic association of post-socialist countries in central Europe which cooperate for smoother accession to the EU and NATO), its development was already following a separate path.[1] The end of this period was marked by partisan defections. These occurred when many of the government coalition's members of Parliament (MPs) joined the official opposition to form a new government, the provisional character of which was recognized even by its creators.

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[1] In its early stages, this movement (HZDS, Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) proved to be very good at bringing together various currents and platforms, thanks to the charismatic personality of its leader, Vladimír Meciar. It turned out later, (particularly after 1995) that the movement's diffuse position, especially evident in their presentations on political topics, was untenable. This was reflected in media criticism which attracted a broad and eager readership. One of the results of the 1998 national elections was the discussion, originating within the HZDS, about the necessity of turning the movement into a standard political party. Thus, it would appear that its existence as a broad movement is drawing to a close.

3. Turning point, 1993–1994

Short as it is, the period between 1993 and 1994 is essential for adequate comprehension of the ensuing developments. A turning point was signaled by the previously mentioned defection of several deputies from the governing coalition and their entry into the ranks of the official opposition. Following the no-confidence vote of the Parliament, the government had to step down. This fact was, in itself, nothing extraordinary for the political culture of Slovakia, especially at a time of ever new alignments and re-alignments. Nevertheless, the power shift eventually resulted in the creation of a very stable political climate for the next four years. This period witnessed the consolidation of important political groups, groups which also competed in the general election of 1998. In 1994, the return of some MPs (along with their respective electorates) had, in principle, created a segmentary pattern in Slovak political life. The strongest of these was comprised of national and nationalist-oriented forces (parties which formed government coalitions until 1998); the second (non-socialist/civil) formed part of the official opposition until 1998 and the last (socialist) was also part of the opposition until the 1998 election results.[2] The government which had been forced to resign after the defection of their former party members regarded this defection as perfidious and simultaneously considered the actions (i.e., the no-confident vote) of the Parliament to be illegitimate. Nationwide, the majority of voters accepted this interpretation so that in the early elections which followed soon after the vote, the dethroned government coalition was re-established. One of the priorities of the "old-new" cabinet was to make the political system of Slovakia so stable that, in the future, similar upsets could disrupt the nation only with great difficulty.

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[2] The combination of a party system machinery and traditional cleavages was perhaps one of the most important signs of the period between 1990 and 1994 (For more detail, see Krivý 1997). Within this framework, for example, the HZDS changed into a force drawing on the electoral legacy of the HSL which, back in 1936, represented Slovakia's nationalist bloc. But this transformation of the HZDS was by no means predictable: it was due to the movement's magnetic leader whose inclusive pro-Slovakia vision easily attracted followers of different ideological persuasions. Moreover, Meciar himself had never been or pretended to be an ideological politician: up to the very end of his premiership, he was, in many respects, a politician who backed and promoted modernization.

4. Stabilization 1994–1998

The period spanning from 1994 to 1998 was very different from the time of change just described. The Slovak political scene stabilized and in fact, remained stable until the general election of 1998. This achievement marked a major success in the building of Slovakia's political system. Its stability can be accounted for in different ways and manifested itself on many levels. Among its major causes was the economic revival and growth typical of the whole period. The official opposition, taught by the unhappy experience of past Parliamentary upheavals, chose to preserve the *status quo* and prevent another early election. Yet, the most significant cause of stability must in all likelihood be seen in the balance achieved between Slovakia's chief, traditional cleavages and the country's political system in 1994. Other bulwarks of stability - much discussed, disputed, and challenged - were introduced by the government and the government-forming political parties through more or less coercive means.

This new strategy of the victorious parties was probably the consequence of the negative experience of 1994, when pursuant to the defection of some coalition MPs, the government was supported only by a minority in the Parliament. The provisions for continued stability were even included as a legitimate part of the government program in 1994. However, these steps were accompanied by a number of controversial practices and in many respects, the policy as a whole defied the hitherto accepted understanding of the rules regulating political relations and behavior in a country committed to democracy. For example, many ruling coalition MPs were placed under an obligation to return their deputy mandates if they changed their partisan loyalties. In the Parliament, the government majority consistently exploited the "majority" system, which amounted to a *de facto* exclusion of the opposition from any consequential participation in the work of the legislative body. To make matters worse, the government (or the MPs associated with it) developed a series of bills concerning the electoral system which, generally speaking, favored larger political alignments and gave political parties greater influence over the choice of deputies.[3] It is understandable, therefore, that the government came under vigorous attack for employing such undemocratic methods. Claims of abuse of power became a popular way of criticizing the parties of the ruling coalition.

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[3] This applies, for example, to the 1995 amendment of Act 80/1990 Coll which substantially expanded the powers of political parties to nominate replacements for resigning deputies. Yet by far the most prominent example of new electoral legislation is the 1998 amendment of the election law, severely disfavoring pre-election coalitions of minor political parties. Under the amended law, each party involved in a coalition has to meet a 5% threshold in order for the coalition to get to Parliament. The opposition criticized the law, arguing that it was tailored to hurt its election chances since its non-socialist segment was comprised of five political parties which had formed a standard pre-election coalition. The law at issue would

5. Elections 1998 – The turning point

The 1998 general elections belonged to those which, under A. Campbell's classification, bore a critical and realigning character. The elections of 1994 brought the ruling coalition and the official opposition 83 and 67 seats, respectively. This ratio conspicuously changed after the 1998 national election, which left the former opposition with 93 seats and the former ruling coalition with 57 seats. The ruling coalition thus lost 26 seats and, subsequently, handed control of the country over to the winners.

The result of the elections did not come as a surprise since they conformed with long-term predictions from analysis of opinion polls. The point is that the ruling coalition lost the majority of the electorate's support which it had back in 1996 (the strength of the opposition having risen ever since). There are undoubtedly many reasons for the ruling coalition's loss of popularity and support. To take one example: although the former opposition had overcome its fragmentary character (paradoxically, this development was significantly assisted by policies pursued by the former government), the institutional structure of the ruling coalition (otherwise the strongest political group) proved to be ineffective. Sadly, the ruling coalition parties never accustomed themselves to the modern way of communicating with an independent media. Although they retained the support of their old sympathizers, they were not skillful in acquiring new ones so that almost all young, first-time voters cast their ballet for the former opposition parties. But the most weighty reason for the failure of the former ruling coalition parties seems to reside in a combination of the following two factors: a) the identification of the government with the forces of traditionalism, and b) Slovakia's continuing modernization. The second factor has been confirmed by the comparative figures showing the number of voters favoring the former opposition in urban and rural areas. In 1994, the countryside was responsible for 53 % of the national vote, while in 1998, it was the urban areas which accounted for 56 % of the national vote.[4]

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considerably complicate the performance of these parties in the 1998 elections and fuse them into one large party.

[4] It is too early to venture an analysis of the post-election period, let alone draw any conclusions. But opinion polls returns show that the influence of the nationalist segment has a declining tendency. Two months after the national election the popularity of the HZDS

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saw a dramatic slippage from 27 % to 16 %. At the same time a 4 percentage points rise (yet insufficient for the recompense) was recorded in the growing popularity of the SNS, Slovak National Party, which is the second – standard – party involved in this nation-building segment. To the extent this research captures the trend successfully, it turns out that not only the political representation of the nationalist segment faces the challenge of ‘modernization’, but the creation of a standard political party institution has become an urgent need.