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National Sentiments, Globalization and Justice: Slovaks Narrating their Democratization Process

Kamila Stullerová

Towards the end of the 20th century it is broadly, even if not unanimously, accepted as a fact that nations are products of modern development. Already nations are notoriously referred to as imagined communities. In this context, certain traditions which played vital roles in the nation formation processes are taken to be invented. *Ossian* and *Královédvorský* and *Zelenohorský* manuscripts have been found to be forged, and sacred state symbols such as flags and anthems have often been invoked in the politically motivated attempt to unite a population under a common idea of nationhood. All of these – whether forged, inauthentic, invented, imagined, or illusory – nevertheless contributed to the stability of the nation state in its formation phase. They were used to legitimate the nation state and provided an environment for a free market economy as well as a liberal democracy. In an age in which nation states are losing their integrity and power for new inter-national, supra-national and global forces, it is no wonder that it is often debated whether the sense of national identity which served so well for some decades must now be replaced by some new (perhaps global) principle of identity. It is as if the old ties were no longer needed and their once sacred meaning could be now be brought under scrutiny.

Of course, to a large extent this re-evaluation applies only to the part of the world called the West.¹ Other parts of the world have to be seen through the lens of the colonial and post-colonial situation or, as for instance in the case of Russia, singled out as unique cases. What happens, though, when there exists a nation on the periphery of the Western world of established nation states which is both too closed¹ to see all that what was and is still happening in its neighboring lands and still outside the processes that are developing in them? What if there is a people whose national identity is strong enough that they know they exist but not who they are and what autonomy entails. What if such a society underwent a modernization process under a Communist regime that was afterward proven to be authoritarian, inefficient, suppressive, exclusionist and criminal. Such a society would have to overcome symptoms of collective schizophrenia, of division between new and old, known and unknown, local and global. This scenario describes the case of Slovakia and its dubious development after 1989, and examining this case tells us a lot about the origins of nations and the general character of nationalism in a language that is contemporary and yet, at the same time, archaic and even ‘old-fashioned’.

We can summarize some of the most influential past events, which are mentioned not so much for their historic importance, but rather chiefly because they are a part of what can be called an ‘historic memory’: beliefs and opinions concerning Slovakia’s own history that are found deep in the “collective experience” of its people and to a great extent mythologized. These events include the arrival of the Slavic tribes to the contemporary Slovak territory in the 5th century; the founding of the Slavic state of Great Moravia in the 9th century; a 1000-year-long Hungarian rule after its fall; a national awakening led by the codifier of the Slovak literary language, Ludovít Štúr; a strong Magyarization pressure towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century; the establishment of the 1st Czechoslovak republic in 1918, followed by a Slovak state in 1939–45; the 1944 anti-Nazi Slovak National Uprising which was accompanied by an anti-Slovak-government armed revolt; the 1948 Communist takeover; 1968 – the year 1968; and, lastly, November 1989 – the year 1989.² The pivotal year of 1989 found Slovakia as a socialist republic with the Czechoslovak federation. During that

¹ The book *The Invention of Tradition* is the best example of this – a brilliant collection of studies, but focusing solely on the Western world.

² I deliberately say in this short list ‘the year 1968’, ‘November, or the year 1989’, as in Slovakia these are popularly used to avoid other popular names ‘Prague Spring’ and ‘Velvet Revolution’, which are for many Slovaks too czechocentric.

crucial time, in which the direction of the new democratic Czechoslovak Federation was to be set, seemingly unexpected opinions appeared on the Slovak scene – voices asking for larger national recognition and self-rule. As the British political scientist of Slovak origin, Erika Harris, observed the Slovaks used the democratization process for their national emancipation (unlike the Slovenes who, according to Harris, did the very opposite and used national separation to realize democratization). It is not the aim of this paper to map the actual development of the Slovak independence movement which found its political expression in the 1990-92 Czecho-Slovak negotiations over the future of the ‘common state of the Czechs and Slovaks’, known as the Hyphen War. Nor is its aim to reconstruct the actual political steps taken by the political representatives after the 1992 elections, when the split of the state was, to a certain extent, determined by a constellation of political elites (mainly two men: Vladimír Mečiar, representing the Slovaks, and Václav Klaus, representing the Czechs). Instead, the aim here is to consider the two-fold development of democratization and growing nationalism, noted by Harris, as these two aspects are reflected in the Slovak thought of that time and, in particular, how they were incorporated into the story of ‘Slovakness’ and what was their appeal. In an effort to extract these views, I try both to build an argument which can explain some aspects of the recent development in Slovakia and raise some further questions which deal with this development.

Each community, in this case a nation, needs a story that recounts its purpose of being. Written and well-argued reflections on the basic questions ‘Who we are’ and ‘Where are we going’ are privileges of the most well-educated members of the community who have enough time to devote themselves to the luxury of writing. These reflections serve two functions. On the one hand, they summarize and express in a more complex manner those opinions and fragments of the story that lie in the consciousness of those members of the community who spend their time engaging in activities other than writing. On the other hand, they move the discussion forward by developing arguments, and connecting them to or juxtaposing them with others, thereby creating a complete story that is then offered to those who only feel unarticulated parts of it. In contrast to the novel, which was an argumentative tool of nationhood primarily in the 19th century (we can call to mind Dickens’ contribution to the formation of ‘Englishness’ or Thomas Mann’s view on ‘Germanness’) in our time it is mainly the genre of the reflective essay that is used for story telling. While the aesthetic element of the novel is popularly regarded as more important than the political element (only recently scholars have begun to study also this aspect of literary production), to the reflective essay belongs a more

straightforward political expression and, on account of this, it has a more narrow purpose.

After the fall of Communism in 1989, the Slovak community was confronted with two basic positions concerning its own story of 'Slovakness.' Of course, proponents of either one are to be found in all walks of life, but when it comes to reflective essayism, two representatives stand out. The first, Vladimír Minác, is a former prominent minister of culture of the Communist regime. The second, Peter Zajac, is a literary critic and scientist by profession. Both are well-read in Slovak and world literature and possess a knowledge of and interest in history. Moreover, both are highly-skilled in their use of language. And yet each differs from the other significantly in his perception of 'Slovakness' and his position on the questions of nation and national identity in the last decade of the 20th century. In my opinion, Minác and Zajac represent two opposite approaches to and concepts of the contemporary Slovak society. They represent two fundamental alternative positions of the Slovak discourse: Minác advocating for perseverance of the national identity based on tradition and common experience and Zajac calling for a non-romantic perception of the nation which should incorporate an idea of civic values and binding rules. Both of them were commenting on the Slovak reality in the crucial years of democratization and economic transformation as well as the issue of Slovak national emancipation. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen two collections of Minác's essays, one of which is a lengthy dialogue with a Slovak poetess who is dictating the themes, and one collection of essays by Zajac.

The two analyzed collections of essays by Minác were published under the titles *Paradiso* and *Hovory M*. The time of their origin can be placed somewhere between 1994 and 1996 and, thematically, they deal with current issues of the society, on one hand, and literary production and approaches to the Slovak reality, on the other. As a well-educated and well-read theoretician, Minác moves from literature to the social reality, employing the language and metaphors of the first to elaborate the second. The theme of nation, national identity, or 'us' is never the title or main theme of an essay, perhaps because this is unnecessary. The theme of national identity is much too broad for this author, since he incorporates it into almost all essays, whether it is built into a discussion of a social theme or a comment on everyday issues. This is already one characteristic feature of his texts which requires further analysis. As I will discuss later, national identity and its perseverance are for Minác so 'natural' that they constitute a perspective from which he sees the problems he wishes to unfold. His fundamental position takes its bearings from an imaginary center of the 'Slovakness' that can be perhaps best expressed by paraphrasing his own words: We are a poor and small nation which has struggled

through history with misery; we are not the chosen ones. This thesis appears in various contexts and situations but it always retains its two building blocks which are then developed: the nation's smallness and the overcoming of harsh conditions. These two elements are developed in various ways, ranging from light ironizing—e.g. “What a small country, what a pocket edition” (Minác, 1996, p. 208)—to some more painful (self-) irony:

This smallness makes us ache in the stomach. We keep offering ourselves to somebody's protection, we constantly want to serve not to something, but to someone; we are attracted by power and greatness not as a goal and sense but only as an asylum, a refuge, where we could moan from morning till evening: I am hurting here, I am itching there. (Minác, 1996, p. 209)

At times his tone lowers itself to total disgrace:

Will our girls serve in twelve chambers for ever? In totally strange ones, to total strangers? A few years ago I mentioned the story of a very young Slovak girl, somewhere from Levice, who came to the sadly known Prague street, into that sadly well-known profession to earn some money to buy furniture as she did not want to get married with a naked ass. ... Yeah, reward. See how much and to how many we have served, still we are not rewarded. (Minác, Podracká, 1998, p. 145)

Already from these few lines we might see that the tone of the texts – irony mixed with sadness and criticism— suggests an internal incapacity combined with an external injustice. We can further note how the thoughts expressed are never discussed linearly, but rather are argued by way of gaps and jumps in time and crafted with stylistic flourish. Minác fits his historical examples into the present by omitting any reference to any exact historical time, using instead archaic and obsolete words which clearly refer to the past. If he does allude to a concrete point in history, it mainly concerns the Slovak-Hungarian relations. But even here, he layers the facts without any qualitative division of the one from the other. This ‘artistic shortening’ thus creates the same effect as does mixing the past and presence. It blurs the qualitative differences between various events and times, and so produces the effect of timelessness. In *belles-lettres* this is a common practice, but in a reflective essay this becomes a dangerous political statement. Consider, for example, the following statement by Minác.

Ethnic cleansing, which has lasted for almost two centuries and which did not take place anywhere else in the world with such a horrifying

and blind nationalist hatred as in Hungary, whether it was Hungary as a part of the Monarchy, Hungary under Horthy, or the Communist Hungary; finally they have minced not only the flesh, but also the bones of all the nationalities living on this territory, they have minced them to ashes. (Minác, Podracká, 1998, pp. 80–81)

This statement not only supports his thesis that the Slovaks are those who have survived the injustices of fate and yet have preserved their culture and identity in spite of this hardship, but it also serves a political function by erasing the borders between historic events, their mythologization, and individual interpretation (which some time borders on prevarication). The strategy is to employ rhetoric rather than logical argumentation: words and sentences blend into one stream that persuade the reader not on the basis of argued truth but emotions. The same can be observed when Minác portrays the contemporary role of the United States:

The United States, which after the decay of Communism surrounded by their power almost without competition the whole planet and the whole known universe, have a government with a tendency towards a power totality, because it is a government on all levels and in all spaces of human activity, from economy through finances, military, politics up to ideology, having all means, money, arms and media for a total rule of the world for the first time in the modern history of human-kind. (Minác, 1996, p. 15)

Minác's small Slovakia was and still is under a constant threat from the outside as well as the inside and the means of protection against these threats consist of historic memory, common experience, tradition, and culture.

The experience, carved in our memory since the young age, remains in us not as a document, but as a living counselor, about whose existence we often don't know, but who is constantly accompanying us as a good shepherd. (Minác, 1996, p. 10)

On one hand, the individual experience of shared values is a means of protection. On the other hand, it is the essence of being itself – the reason for existence and the protection from the endangering of existence:

Custom³ is doublesided, it has a Janus-face turned back and forward at the same time. Without a custom we would hardly renew our

³ The word 'custom' does not express the full semantic valence of what Minác has in mind when he writes in Slovak 'zvyk'. Besides a cultural use, 'zvyk' has also a political one; 'custom' is more or less already emptied and serves only on the level of folklore. This

cultural memory – without a cultural memory the individual life and the life of human community is only a life in shadow, only an “as if” life. (Minác, 1996, pp. 52–53)

Ignorance of the traditions and customs leads to spiritual homelessness as well as a lack of morality. (Minác, 1996, p. 11) This void is then filled in by values such as money (‘the gold calf’) from which dependence ensues. A small community – or more precisely the village – which is a (historically, economically and morally) closed unity, offers, in the Slovak case, security and a safe place for traditional values. (Minác, 1996, pp. 98–99)

To sum up: Minác’s story of the Slovaks begins in time immemorial. Slovak existence is validated, defended, and fostered by traditions and collective memory, i.e., what binds ‘us’ with our forefathers. As in the past as well as the present, these values are under great danger, because, first, the community of those who possess them is small; second, not all members of the community care about such things; third, there is an external danger that the authentic experience and culture will be swallowed by one of the stronger ones, or by the juggernaut of global culture whose language is money. Part and parcel of this narrative content is its style. In fact, the style and means used in the narrating are significant for the analysis of the whole. Minác does not offer a single story. Observing and commenting on a variety of issues, he assembles pieces of a mosaic seemingly at random. His language is rich, consisting in archaisms, obsolete words, realia from Slovak folk tales, Biblical folklorized citations – i.e., that which is preserved from the bible in the mind of the ‘common man’ – metaphors – e.g., “The one who forgets the grasshopper (of childhood and youth) preserved in amber (of memory) loses his identity” – and, lastly, similes. These fulfill the same function as the deliberate blending of times and places and the thematic shifts between past and present. They create a sense of continuity, timelessness, and thus immortality and strength.

If one compares these characteristics with the conclusions of the British Slavist Robert B. Pynsent, Minác appears not to be a unique figure of the second half of the 20th century; instead he is merely a link in a long chain. In his book *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality*, Pynsent mainly examines the thought and writings of the 19th century Herderian ‘national awakeners’ – which include P. J. Šafárik, Ján Kollár and, chiefly, Ludovít Štúr– along with the 20th century hard-line nationalists – which include Štefan Polakovic and Matúš Kucera– and, drawing on these figures, he analyzes Slavic and Slovak myths, which

difference is further discussed by Slavoj Žižek in his essay “Multiculturalism or Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism”.

overlap in many respects, into their constituent parts. Concerning the Slovaks, Pynsent identifies 6 main mythical components and beliefs which we can enumerate below. (Pynsent, 1994, pp. 150–70):

1. The Slovaks had been, in their historical role, primarily civilizers. They had to teach the Magyars to plough and how to build houses.
2. The Great Moravian Empire was a part (and a glorious part) of Slovak history and it was the first state of the Slovaks.
3. Pious Slovaks were the protectors of Christianity and began converting the Magyar common people to the Christian faith.
4. The life of the Slovak people remained uninterrupted throughout (and despite) the centuries under Hungarian oppression.
5. 19th century heavy Magyarization and the injustice that was exercised on the Slovak nation created a lot of suffering but did not break the spirit of the Slovaks.
6. The Slovaks perceive themselves as a nation of heavy drinkers.

Vladimír Minác incorporates all of these themes except, at least explicitly, for the last. But although he does not call attention to the simple activity of drinking, he does emphasize those characteristics which this theme of drinking is ultimately intended to convey. No group is, of course, proud of its vices and, with this in mind, the seemingly negative connotation of this myth in fact connotes a positive self-image of the Slovaks as healthy and physically strong individuals. These same characteristics are repeated by Minác. Regarding the five other features of the Slovak myth, Minác obviously does not integrate them into his own reflections directly. One can easily see how references to the fourth and second are, however, introduced and transformed in his strategy of timelessness and continuity. Furthermore, the fourth and fifth themes appear also as direct remarks on the Slovak-Hungarian relations, amplified by the similar structure of more recent relations: small Slovakia and the big EU, USA, and international organizations. The first theme is reflected in Minác's emphasis on traditions, customs, and experiences passed from generation to generation in order to protect the values inherent in them. In other words, the theme of civilizing virtues is encompassed in his concept of tradition. Pynsent's third feature undergoes the greatest transformation in Minác's writings. This can be explained by Minác's Communist past, during which he was one of the regime's prominent authors. Christianity and its positive influences are transformed into a simple morality without any (obvious) ideological background. This enables Minác to avoid Christianity and faith and extract out of it only morality, which, however, he leaves indeterminate. Morality, as a number of

other concepts, is for him a synonym for virtue: an empty but definitely positive element in the sea of evil.

Still, Minác's position is far more complicated than as it might first appear. He is not merely a primordialist ideologue of nationalism who is manipulating facts and dates. Although certain features of Slovak myth are undeniably present, his writings are too intricate to be reduced to just a re-narration of an old myth. As a well-read scholar he combines a typical nationalist line of argument with comments on contemporary political, economic, social and cultural issues, replete with quotations and references to established thinkers such as Karl Popper, Neil Postman, and Marshall McLuhan as well as examples from the sphere of media, which in this respect resembles the style of Slavoj Žižek. Thus, he does not understand nation in the *Blut und Boden* sense, but rather in the sense of a repeated choice:

We do not become members of a national community in the moment of birth but in the moment of choice: instinctively or consciously we chose our affiliation towards language, moral values hierarchy, communal myths, lifestyle, broadly defined culture of the community. (Minác, 1996, pp. 30–31)

Minác also advocates a kind of historical revision when he calls for forgiveness towards history: “we should learn to live in peace with history ... and not promote memory to be the sole referee.” Accordingly, he abandons the ‘never forget’ position typically found in other forms of nationalism, even though he breaks this rule at times, e.g., in the passage on Hungarians already cited in this paper. Therefore, it is more plausible to characterize this argument differently from an attempt to make a certain cut in the history. Though Pynsent does not include it, I think there is at least one more element of the Slovak myth: the belief that the Slovaks have endured oppression and injustice without taking up arms against their enemies and, without vengeance, have peacefully resisted their oppressors. Minác's rather controversial argument assimilates this mythic element, too. His emphasis on positive values carried in a culture that should be chosen over and over is in fact a version of the ‘never forget’ myth, though less irrationally based than a simple primordial view of nation and its history. Minác can thus be represented as a modern troubadour of authentic values and culture as well as a protector of traditions and values proven throughout the centuries. This aspect of his writing might be appealing even to people who do not share any nationalist opinions.

But this is not the end of Minác's story. His position enables him not only to interpret history as unjust but also to criticize the present on the basis of dubious points of reference. He fiercely criticizes the Slovak economic transition and

democratization processes, wedding them to the dangerous and unifying cultural and economic hegemony of the western world represented by the US government, the EU, NGOs and INGOs, the IMF, and the World Bank. All of these are forces of new global reality which are, according to Minác, driven solely by money. Interestingly enough, democracy is in this respect a victim of these forces and Slovaks will obviously lose this fight as long as they listen to the voices of the international greedy, money-driven powers. However, Minác is never clear what he means precisely by the concept of democracy. Instead, he uses this term as an empty placeholder for or synonyms of such concepts as 'right', 'just', or simply 'good'. True democracy is to be sought in small communities, realized in places such as villages which have proven their moral and economic strengths already in previous crises. (Minác, 1996, pp. 98–99).

The turn from large anonymous entities towards federalized miniature communities and townships, only where – according to me – can democracy be fully and optimally realized institutionally and in everyday human relations. ... The ideal democracy is possible only in small communities. (Minác, 1996, pp. 98–99 & 154-155)

At the same time, this opinion strongly reminds us of Communist rhetoric, which claimed that (the people's) democratic values were embodied in the system and were endangered only by the 'human failure' or 'imperialist pseudo-democracy'.

Vladimír Minác's narration of Slovak post-1989 development is based on the old-myth of Slovakness. The narration flows endlessly like a circle that cannot be cut and entered into for critical revision. What he defends are actually some values and traditions including language, customs, stories, close personal relations which are important for him and which he would not like to see decay or disappear. He defends these, however, at the expense of intolerance towards everything and everybody who does not seem to share them with him. His emphasis on the continuity and timelessness of the tradition does not allow him to distinguish phases and differences in this supposed continuum. As a result, any qualitative differences between the era of pre-1918 Slovak existence, the Communist regime, and the post-1989 development becomes erased.

The writings of Peter Zajac also incorporate the notion of smallness when speaking about both the past and present of Slovakia. He, however, does not understand this concept as a given condition which is impervious to change. In line with the slogan 'small is beautiful', Zajac claims that a small nation does not entail an unimportant, uninteresting nation, but also stresses that it also does not automatically

imply exclusivity. Small is beautiful only if the beauty is sought and worked out, and this principle permeates the whole of Zajac's writing.

The Slovak struggle for their historic identity was always a twofold struggle for human and national identity. For human in the sense of civic – i.e. for the acceptance of equality of rights for me as well as the other; for national in the sense of a state, for acceptance of common right for the whole land. (Zajac, 1996, p.16)

This effort, or struggle, is specified in two ways. First, it is temporally-historically concretized which, therefore, eliminates the idea of a mythical timelessness. Zajac points out certain turning points that make up Slovak history– the years 1848, 1944, and 1989– and locates his leitmotif of the two-fold struggle quoted in the passage above in them and identifies a lack of either one or both of these aspects of identity after every major change before 1989. A timeless continuity manifests itself only in his treatment of family genealogy. Zajac mentions his ancestors and their involvement in the events of 1848 and 1944 in order to draw a parallel between them and himself, an active agent of the 1989 changes. The second specification assumes the form of a critical evaluation of the chosen historic events according to their success or failure with respect to the national and the civic. In the past, these two did not coincide; in fact, the one existed at the cost of the other (e.g. the 1939–45 Slovak state). Zajac focuses his reflections on the civic aspect, since this is for him an indispensable requirement for the fulfillment of any national ambitions. For him, democracy means the realization of civic values and rights. Democratic society is a prism through which one can discern the ambitions of a nation as well as its national sentiments.

One can speak about a sovereign nation in a democratic society only then, when it is a nation of free citizens, a nation based on human dignity, a nation respecting basic human rights of individuals and minorities, a prosperous, educated and cultured nation, a nation respecting other nations, national minorities and ethnic groups. Also a nation with a clear and unequivocal civic fundament. (Zajac, 1996, p. 130)

Using a simple parallel between the civic principle of changing community (*Gemeinschaft*) into society (*Gesellschaft*), he distinguishes between an ethnic understanding of nation– i.e., nation as a community based on common language, culture, tradition and territory– and a political understanding of nation, which becomes a full-fledged nation only when it becomes a nation of citizens who are equal before the law (Zajac, 1996, p. 25). In developing this distinction, Zajac dismisses the view which sees national identity based on national sentiment as a legiti-

mate and binding feature of a modern and multinational state. National sentiment, which he calls a reminiscence of Romanticism, is for him a tool of solidarity and one which is too connected with myth, irrationality and exclusion to be acceptable to a democratic society. (Thus he demonstrates that the Romantic notions and symbols which the 1993 Slovak Republic adopted were based on a forgery.) A democratic alternative to national sentiment is solidarity based on a civic principle, namely, 'constitutional patriotism'. Although he does not directly cite Jürgen Habermas, Zajac uses this term and concept to solve the dichotomy of Slovak society. It should be noted, however, that there is a significant difference between Habermas' and Zajac's notions of constitutional patriotism. This difference does not appear on the conceptual level, but rather involves the sorts of circumstances which motivate the appeal of this concept. In his essay *Die postnationale Konstellation und die Zukunft der Demokratie*, (Habermas, 1998, pp. 105–22) Habermas articulates his idea of "Verfassungspatriotismus" in the context of a reflection on the effects which globalization exercise on a national state. There he identifies a need for new sources of solidarity in post-national European Union inhabited by a multicultural society in which the cohesion power of national communities is challenged. In contrast, Zajac's appropriation of this concept has a different motivation. The region to which he is referring is also shaped by global forces, but certainly not (yet) to the extent that Habermas' 'Germany' is, and especially not in the political sphere. He observes certain similarities between Habermas' EU and his own Slovakia – both are multiethnic and multicultural – and agrees with Habermas that a national state based on *Volk*-solidarity is too constricting in a global age and diversely structured society. Yet, Zajac overlooks the diverse and complex development of western societies and Slovakia. By way of a de-constructive approach, he dismisses all primordial arguments and calls for the perseverance of something as vague as national identity, while taking into account new global forces and new post-cold-war demands on democratic society. If these should be incompatible with Minác's authentic culture, he clearly chooses the first ones. Constitutional patriotism is their realization, which only leaves unsettled, then, the issue of the Slovak Constitution and its preamble. Zajac calls its guiding philosophy Romantic, which originates from a revision of the past rather than a vision of the future.⁴ This implies the political will to change the preamble's text from a nation-

⁴ The preamble reads: "We, the Slovak nation, mindful of our ancestors' political and cultural legacy and of centuries' experience of struggles for national existence and our own statehood, in accordance with the Cyrillo-Methodian spiritual legacy and the historical heritage of Great Moravia, on the basis of the natural right of nations to self-determination, together with members of national minorities and ethnic groups living on the territory of the Slovak

centric to citizen-centric, and this is a challenge worthy of being proud of if undertaken. This leads to the second main implication of Zajac's texts: A nation can be proud of itself only when it clearly achieves something based on democratic principles; only this kind of pride, free from myths and prejudices, is genuine.

When Michael Walzer began his book *Thick and Thin* by referring to the 1989 Prague demonstration as an example to orient his analysis, he intended it primarily as an apt metaphor for his argument of moral criticism. In brief, Walzer uses the image of people marching in the streets of Prague, carrying signs with words like 'Truth' or 'Justice', and explains that when he saw this on TV he immediately identified himself with the marchers, as many other people do. But he further explains how this moment of identification is temporally limited. People can unite themselves by means of some 'thin' understanding of truth or justice that abstracts from any particular culture and complexity. However, as soon as those demonstrating begin to discuss particular procedures for incorporating these general ideals into the life of their particular society, the concepts 'thicken' and agreement begins to break down.

If we take this metaphor literally, and fill in the empty faces of Walzer's Prague marchers, we might come to a conclusion that is, in my opinion, absolutely crucial for understanding Slovak, and, perhaps even more broadly, Eastern European, post-1989 reality. For the purposes of this 'cast', we will put aside the question whether the real personae of Vladimír Minác and Peter Zajac took part in the 1989 demonstration against the Communist regime. One can surmise that the first did not and the second did, but from their writings it can be assumed that, at some point, both identified with the claims for 'truth' and 'justice', and so we might imagine them among those who in fact held such signs in their hands. As justice is much more often mentioned, or at least implied, the banner of 'justice' will serve best in this virtual demonstration against 'injustice.' When Minác and Zajac hold their own 'justice' signs, Walzer, and everybody else, cannot say no. However, as soon as the two develop their specific opinions on this notion – Minác seeking a reward for long-lasting injustices against his nation which have currently been transformed into a global threat to authentic culture (otherwise put: the unjust treatment of the small and weak by the large and strong); Zajac advocating for justice before the law

Republic, in the interests of permanent peaceful cooperation with other democratic states, in the endeavour to implement a democratic form of government, guarantees of a free life, the development of spiritual culture and economic prosperity, we the citizens of the Slovak Republic resolve ..." (English translation cited after Pynsent, 1994, p. 158).

which does not discriminate on the basis of ethnic origin – we realize that the thick concepts of justice each develops do not overlap. The same can be said about:

1. *Traditions and common experience* – for Minác a source of security, continuity and the essence of life; for Zajac a burdensome myth based on false beliefs.
2. *Democracy* – for Minác a way of directly hearing everyone's voice and, therefore, to be found only in small communities (where, he thinks, this practice is not a novelty of the past 10 years); for Zajac a way of just organization for the whole of society, based on consensus and binding rules.
3. *Nation* – for Minác a group of people sharing common values, culture, traditions, which is the only group that can produce enough solidarity to accept redistribution within itself as just; for Zajac only an inherited community that has to prove its right to exist by employing democratic principles and law.

In response to Walzer's argument that single societies must be given the autonomy to determine for themselves how to transform a thin concept of a 'truth' and 'justice' into a 'thick' one, we must emphasize that the actual process might be more difficult than Walzer himself indicates when he writes:

Were I to be invited to China to give a seminar on democratic theory, I would explain, as best I could, my own views about the meaning of democracy. But I would try to avoid the missionizing tone, for my views include the idea that democracy in China will have to be Chinese – and my explanatory powers do not reach to what that means. ... The principle of consent requires this much at least: that Chinese democracy be defined by the Chinese themselves in terms of their own history and culture. (Walzer, 1994, p. 60)

These two narrations we have examined are, in fact, two ways of articulating 'our own' environment for a 'thick' elaboration of truth, justice and democracy. The unbridgeable gap between them gives the clue for some questions that are often asked when one tries to understand the path Slovakia took after the fall of its Communist regime. The Slovak story and self-reflection was split into two diametrically different versions of a tale in which 'we' and 'our' met with 'them' and 'their.' It is difficult to say what the final 'Slovak story' is. The majority of the population does not spend its time reflecting on this issue and still less writing about it. If they do express themselves, then it is in the elections. The elections in 1998 showed that the story told by Peter Zajac found more proponents than did the story of Vladimír Minác. Whether this will remain so, and whether Zajac's values of civil society, democratic order and constitutional patriotism will remain the leading ones in the Slovak story is still open.

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