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DEBATE ON THE INDEPENDENCE OF SLOVAKIA

Jan Rychlík – Lubomír Pána – Petr Just – Piotr Bajda*

ABSTRACT

The specialists from Czech Republic and Poland discussed on the topic of twenty years of the independence of Slovakia. The discussion focused on the key issues of the split of Czechoslovakia, the successes and faults of the development of Slovakia in the past 20 years, the differences in the political development of the Czech Republic, Poland and the Slovak Republic, as well as an evaluation of the political situation in Slovakia. The objective of the debate is the mutual reflection of opinions and personal experiences of specialists in the research of Slovak political system.

Key words: debate on the independence of Slovakia, assessment of political developments in Czech, Poland and Slovak Republic, reflection on political system of the Slovak Republic

The subject of the discussion: 20years of independence of Slovakia. Experts from the Czech Republic and Polish Republic shared their opinions. Their answers to the questions were as follows: **prof. PhDr. Jan Rychlík, DrSc.** Czech historian, specialist in modern Czech, Slovak and Czechoslovak history; **doc. Dr. Lubomír Pána, Ph.D.** Czech specialist in political sciences and public administration of Czech Republic and Slovak Republic; **PhDr. Petr Just, Ph.D.** Czech political scientist, examines political system of Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic and Slovakia; **Piotr Bajda, Ph.D.** Polish political scientist who specializes in political systems of the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic.

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1. How do you evaluate the last twenty years of existence of the Slovak Republic? If you had to evaluate what Slovakia has achieved during the last twenty years, what positive and negative factors would you consider being key ones?

J. RYCHLÍK: I see the last twenty years of the history of the independent Slovak Republic as very successful. Some of the most positive events in Slovak development: the 1998 elections, which saw **Vladimir Meciar** removed from power, Slovak admission to the NATO and the EU in 2004, Slovak admission to the Schengen Area in 2007 and, of course, the adoption of the Euro. Negative moments: All the years of the government of **Vladimir Meciar**.

L. PÁNA: The positive trends in the Slovak Republic for the past twenty years are undoubtedly:

- a) The preparation and implementation of the EU admission.
- b) The settlement of internal short-term conflicts – party and religion (Catholics vs. Protestants).
- c) The strengthening of National and State identity.
- d) The construction of transport infrastructure, especially road infrastructure.
- e) Economic growth. The Czech Gross Domestic Product has increased by 56.7% in the past twenty years, the Slovak Gross Domestic Product has increased by 108% (V. Klaus, *We, Europe and the World*, 2013, p. 79; ČSÚ, *Historical Yearbook of National Accounts 1990-2010*)

Thanks to the above mentioned trends, the Slovak Republic enjoyed a much greater integration with the European Union than the Czech Republic; adoption of the Euro, the many economic reforms launched the economic growth, which in the coming years, could lead to Slovak Republic „passing“ the Czech Republic in a number of economic indicators.

Some of the negative trends:

- a) Political clientelism and corruption.
- b) Increase in regional disparities.
- c) Nationalism and increase of problems with socially excluded localities.
- d) Extremism.

P. JUST: It is not easy to evaluate twenty years in a few lines of text. Both the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic underwent dynamic development throughout the past twenty years. This could easily be a several-semester course. Therefore, allow me to share just a few remarks. As I mentioned above, Slovak Republic went through dynamic development in the past twenty years. It experienced political crisis as well as shiny years. The post-communist democracies are still very weak and are inclined to the misuse of power by populist politicians. This is a general problem that all democracies in Central and Eastern Europe face. Slovakia has direct experience with such misuse of power in the mid 1990s. However, it also has direct experience in mobilisation of civic society in order to remove such politicians from politics, as seen during 1998 elections.

P. BAJDA: The first opportunity that I had to visit Slovakia was in 1994. I was not yet a university lecturer. I was a graduate in political science, who had just started working at the Stefan Batory Foundation for the East-Central European Forum. It was part of the Soros Foundations network in post-communist Europe. Contrary to other parts of the Foundation, we did not give out grants. Our task was to organise conferences, seminars and study visits to understand what was happening in our part of the region. We observed and analysed the political transition of the Polish eastern and southern border. That's when my boss decided that he needed two people, one be responsible for Belarus, the second for Slovak Republic. That is how my Slovak adventure started.

Why do I want to recall these starting points? If someone would have told me in 1995 that Slovakia would be a member of NATO and the European Union and that it would be in the main core of the integration processes, I would have considered him or her as potentially a famous science fiction writer. It was close, very close and Slovakia would have found itself outside of the European Union in one club together with Ukraine and Moldavia. Slovakia jumped the train into the European Union and stayed inside it only thanks to the hands of its neighbours; it was caught and pulled in at the last moment. This only shows the difference, where Slovakia could be, and where it is today. Undoubtedly, Slovakia has had the toughest and most winding road to the European Union and NATO among the V4 countries.

This is what I consider to be crucial in the assessment of two decades of Slovakia.

2. Do you consider the split up of Czechoslovakia to be a positive step? If yes, how?

J. RYCHLÍK: I evaluate the split neutrally. Personally, I did not welcome the split, but at that given time after the 1992 elections I saw no other alternative. The idea of a Confederation, envisioned by HZDS would not be possible due to the incompatibility of the political programs of ODS and HZDS. Ultimately, this would only lead to chaos and the spontaneous decay of Czechoslovakia. The actual split was not important; what was important was the then political situation. The split of Czechoslovakia took place in a time where Slovakia began to be dominated by undemocratic tendencies. They even deepened during Meciar's second Government. Slovakia was subsequently excluded from the integration process. There was a threat that the Slovak-Czech border would become the eastern border of NATO and the EU, and that a new Iron Curtain would be formed. That would be a tragedy indeed. Thank God, **V. Meciar** and **J. Slota** are now in the grim shadows of history. Since the regimes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are now fully compatible, both countries are members of NATO and the EU. There is no passport or customs check between the two countries. It practically doesn't matter if we live in two states or in one federal state.

L. PÁNA: Yes and no. In principle, it is an inherent right of every nation to self-determination. The specific reasons for the separation of our countries have a historical character. Czechoslovakia was a unitary state which inadequately dealt with national issues. On the other hand, I believe that at the time of the general tendencies of integration it was possible to choose a different solution than immediate dissolution of the State. I am a supporter of the United States of Europe. We could be the prototype of this unification, for example a Federation where some of the state function would be shared – e.g. defence, foreign affairs, or currency.

P. JUST: As most of the people in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, I was not fan of the split in 1992. I was 14 years old at that time and did not think about the Czech-Slovak coexistence and its problems too much. Of course, I was not a political scientist back then, I was just a kid who had spent many summers in Slovakia before. And that was my only qualification. However, looking back now, having studied modern Czechoslovak, Czech and Slovak history and

politics and being enriched by more knowledge on both nations, I think the split was a natural and necessary step. The constitutional construction of federation was created during non-democratic regime and did not prove to work well and efficiently in the time of political pluralism. The differences between Czech and Slovak political representation appeared to be much bigger than originally expected. If Czechoslovakia remained as one country, sooner or later more conflicts would come out. Therefore at the end, the split helped both newly fully independent nations to grow up.

P. BAJDA: In my opinion Slovak Republic is still an unfinished project. When watching public debates it often seems to me that the Slovaks have not yet defined their place in the world. Once you want to be part of Central Europe, other times a bridge between the East and the West. Bratislava's dream is to become a second Switzerland. However, in political and business links Slovakia is closer to being the second Cyprus instead. This lack of full awareness and defining of own place on the geopolitics map of Europe is I think the biggest threat. I do not know where Bratislava is in the integration processes within the European Union. It would not have been the Slovak contribution to the EU was limited to sheep cheese and folk music. It is true – Slovak Republic is a small state but not the smallest one.

3. *Where do you see the fundamental difference between the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic or the Slovak Republic and the Polish Republic? What do you consider to be essential differences in the political development of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic or the Slovak Republic and Poland?*

J. RYCHLÍK: I see no significant difference in the development of the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic.

L. PÁNA: Slovakia and the Czech Republic are both multiparty parliamentary democracies; in essence, they are in a similar proportion of the time of transformation. There are differences and similarities in general and in political cultures. Both political systems solve serious social problems: crime, prostitution, drug addiction, as well as family breakdown and unemployment. Both systems in the process of transformation exist at a relatively same level of modernisation, i.e. at the stage of transition from simple modernisation to

reflexive modernisation (cf. U. Beck, Risk Society). Besides these general trends we could provide a number of concrete examples. For instance, the Czech Republic has avoided the situation where one political party would have parliamentary majority. Moreover, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is still amongst the most significant and most stable political parties in the Czech Republic. What is positive is the fact that there is a good mutual relationship between these two countries despite the fact that the political parties in charge there come from the opposite political spectrum.

P. JUST: When comparing political development in both countries we see both similarities and differences. Again, this could be a subject of a whole course. However, both countries face serious threats. Both countries have to fight populism, extremism and politicians, who take politics only as a business for themselves and their close friends. I therefore wish that Slovaks and Czechs find enough force and courage to act as real controllers of their governments and politicians. The major difference currently can be seen in the role of our countries in the European Union and in the international politics, generally in the activity of our diplomacies. Slovakia seems to be more active in the field of both European and global politics as well. It proves that even a small country can be heard and seen (positively) worldwide.

P. BAJDA: A few facts stand out as we look at the Slovak-Polish relationship during those last twenty years. What worries me the most is the lack of mutual interest. Poles know very little about Slovakia and vice versa. When I worked at the Polish Institute in Bratislava in 2000-2004, I was amazed how much Slovaks were interested in Slovenian, Serbian or Croatian literature, and very little in Polish. Sometimes it seems that there is no world on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains from the Slovak point of view, despite the Polish-Slovak border being the longest one among all the Slovak neighbours. I do not even understand the reason for this lack of interest. But the worst part is that this vacuum is filled by stereotypes. We are living too close to each other. We need to have some mutual relationship. If we don't know a little about ourselves, this space will be filled by stereotypes. This will then be used easily by politicians and various business circles. Speaking of politicians, I do not mean only the Polish and Slovak ones. Sometimes mutual stereotypes are used by politicians of other countries from the East and the West. The latest media campaign against Polish food can be an academic case study as media would be used in

the interest of one businessman. Let it be just an example of how much we have to do to improve our relationship.

What concerns political relations, I think we all agree that it is not used in 100% chance. In my opinion, the most visible lack of political will is in the improvement of infrastructure that would connect our states. If we are not able to meet, how can we know and understand each other? Poor infrastructure limits not only tourism but trade as well. In my opinion we suffer from lack of Slovak clear advocate for the project of the transport route Via Carpathia, which connects the north and south of the European Union. We cannot just focus on cooperation between the East and the West. This will bring us to the role of the periphery and transit corridors only.

It is difficult to compare the Polish and Slovak political system. We are democratic countries, with well-established parliamentary systems, which have, however, failed sometimes. There are some things which Slovakia is jealous of and some things Poland is jealous of. Poland has a much more independent judicial system. Slovakia does not have a closed political scene as much as Poland is. It is much easier to get new parties into the parliament in Slovakia. In Poland, we are doomed to see the same faces, arguments and the same views. Until recently, the elections in Slovakia had a 70% attendance. It was something that we looked at with admiration and envy in Poland. Today, voter turnout is similar in Poland and Slovakia. It is a proof of the crisis of citizens' confidence to politicians.

4. What do you think about the current political situation in Slovak Republic? How do you evaluate the development of the quality of democracy in Slovakia? Where is the political development of the Slovak Republic after twenty years?

J. RYCHLÍK: I think that the current political situation in Slovak Republic is stable. The quality of democracy is compatible with the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

L. PÁNA: The Slovak Republic as a member of the European Union has the essential characteristics of a Member State. These characteristics (institutions) guarantee a framework in which democracy can thrive. In the era of modernisation reflections a social and political system will probably need to respond to changes in the economic system, which in the context of

globalisation will be less protected by traditional boundaries. The State will still be more like “bodyguards of transnational investors” (Bauman). Capital in relation to work will be freer, and change the status and perception of employment. All this will affect the structure and functioning of the family. Finally, big political parties will more or less start turning into parties of a cartel nature.

It is possible that the party system in the Slovak Republic will lead to apolitical crisis, because there is no balance of political parties on the right and left. Unless, for example, in the next election someone manages to beat SMER-SD. It will however be a naked and fragile coalition, made up of many pages of disagreement – e.g. current right-wing opposition is made up of seven right-wing parties.

P. JUST: As most of the post-communist countries, Slovakia adopted fundamental institutional principles of modern democratic political systems and allowed free competition of political parties. From this point of view, it is standard European democratic country and this fact is even more stressed by its membership in the key European and Euro-Atlantic alliances. However, again as in most of the post-communist countries (incl. the Czech Republic), the party system and government stability is quite weak and fragile. Although Slovakia has currently single party majority government and therefore “lacks” any intra-coalition conflicts, this is not a situation that usually appeared before, in fact Slovakia witnesses such situation for the first time in its 20 years independence. However, for most of the past 20 years, many coalitions faced not only conflicts between coalition partners, but also (and sometimes mainly) conflicts within major coalition and ruling parties. Crisis of standard political parties have unfortunately impact on increase of populism and extremism, which is the biggest challenge for today’s Slovakia.

P. BAJDA: I cannot say that Slovak Republic is in an easy position today. The Eurozone crisis continues and has a negative impact on all of Europe. Crisis is a time to save not to spend money. It breaks down the social and cultural climate. During the crisis, there is no place for solidarity and subsidiarity. It’s a good time for populists. This is probably the greatest danger that faces the Slovak Republic.

What must worry is the weakness of the opposition in Slovak Republic. A weak opposition always corrupts the government. This causes them to feel

more impunity. In this situation, with impunity more interest groups are formed. This is a dangerous moment not only for Slovakia, but for all of the Central Europe. The next years will determine our position and place within the framework of the European Union. We have a last chance to make good use of money from the European Cohesion Fund Program. It will most likely be the last big sum of money that we receive. This raises the risk of corruption. It's no secret that Slovak Republic is the most vulnerable to corruption among the V4 countries. The Gorilla scandal revealed the scale of this practice. It does not appear that the Slovak political elites are ready to fight the corruption. The weakness of the Slovak judiciary also does not bode well. Looking to Slovak Republic from the outside is worth emphasising. It seems that recently the mass media have ceased to be a tool to control politicians. It does not increase the quality of democracy in the country.

I would like to draw attention to one more issue. Slovakia is in the mainstream of European Union integration processes. It could be the voice of the V4 in the Eurozone. But very little use is made of its position to promote Central European Cooperation. I'm not too sure what Slovakia wants to achieve in its foreign policy. I do not know how important Visegrad Cooperation the Eastern Partnership is for your leaders. Slovak Republic can not only be the recipient of regional cooperation. We need you to be actively involved in these processes. I hope that the forthcoming Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group will show a more active and creative Slovak face.

Despite these concerns, Slovak Republic is an important part of the Visegrad cooperation with a stable democratic system. It is good to have such a neighbour.

5. What would you wish for Slovak Republic in the future?

J. RYCHLÍK: I wish for Slovak Republic to have much success in the further integration into the EU.

L. PÁNA: In the economic field: for the average wage in Slovak Republic to be comparable or higher than in the Czech Republic, increase in public expenditure for education (comparable or higher than in the Czech Republic), increase in average age, decrease of unemployment by half – reduction in the long run, increase in the quality and number of investors.

P. JUST: I wish Slovakia only the best. I wish it had active citizens and civic society that cares about politics and politicians who care about people. Am I not too naïve?

P. BAJDA: I would like to see a more confident Slovakia. A small state can be a very important partner, especially one as geographically situated as Slovakia is. Poland has a key location for the cooperation between the East and the West. But Slovakia geographically is even more important than Poland. Without Slovakia there is no chance for the implementation of key projects in Internarium connecting the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Adriatic one. I wish I could use highways in Slovakia to get to various places. I wish I could go to Kosice by direct train from Krakow or Rzeszow in less than 9 hours. I wish to arrive at Bratislava airport and not to be forced to fly to Vienna. I wish for the Slovaks to feel like real Central Europeans. I would like you to be a little more interested in Poland and Polish culture, to have the courage to cross the mountains not only for shopping.

And my dream is to have political elite for which we will not be ashamed. In both our countries, we need politicians whose actions will ensure that young people will start coming back from the United Kingdom, Ireland and Italy to their homes. The outflow of young, talented and educated is much more dangerous for Slovakia than Poland. We cannot afford to be in a place without a younger generation that has not found a chance and hope for their future in Central Europe.

At the end, allow me to thank the one person who does not expect gratitude from me and he is not expected it. I want to thank **Vladimir Meciar**, because if not for his politics, I would most likely not involve in Slovak issues. Through him I got to know the history of Slovakia, I tried to understand Slovak politics. On this occasion, I met many wonderful people. I will not mention them all, because I ran out to the space reserved for my article. Nor do I want to name only a few, because all of my Slovak friends are the same importance to me. I do wish to thank all of them. And I promise to deal with Slovak issues further.

Discussion was chaired by: **doc. PhDr. Daniela Škutová, PhD.**