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TWENTY YEARS OF THE INDEPENDENT SLOVAKIA FROM POLISH PERSPECTIVE

Radosław Zenderowski*

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the socio – political processes in Slovakia after gaining the independence. The author evaluates the processes from three points of view. First, he analyses the similarities between Slovakia and the states of Central and Eastern Europe. In the second part, he parses the different features distinguishing Slovakia on background of socio – political changes in the region. The last part of the article deals with the Slovak issue from the Polish perspective. The part contains the author’s own research concerning the image of Slovakia in the main Polish electronic media

Key words: Slovakia, Poland, Central Europe, national identity, similarities, differences

Introduction

Independence – this word has a very strong emotional resonance in Central and Eastern Europe. From the historical perspective, for the majority of the peoples in our region, in contrast to Western Europe, Russia or Turkey, independence is not at all so obvious. It means that it is not given once and for all. Many of us are aware of the fact that you need to sacrifice a lot in order to get it. Unfortunately, many of us also forget that if we don’t want to lose it, we should take care of it every day. The history of Central and Eastern Europe can be seen in terms of the struggles and dreams of independence (understood broadly – in terms of state sovereignty, or even political or cultural autonomy), while the history of most nations of Western Europe, Russia and Turkey can be seen in terms of fighting for new territories and expanding their political power. The tendency mentioned earlier is particularly pronounced in the 19th and 20th Century. In the 21st Century we are facing the challenge to redefine our

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understanding of independence. The majority of the countries in our region already are – or soon will be – the members of the European Union – an organisation which makes the importance of the independence relative. Still, there is an ongoing, heated debate about how many competences and authority can and should be transferred to the European Union. It is a very special discussion, because "*rejoice in*" proclaiming the independence and sovereignty (it started in 1989) lasted just a few years.

Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 is an amazing example of state-building processes taking place in the short period of time. At the beginning of 1990, in Central and Eastern Europe (except for Greece, Turkey, Austria, Germany and Finland) there were only eight states¹. In 2008, after the declaration of secession by the government in Pristina (Kosovo), the twentieth country was founded². It means that in 18 years fourteen new countries have come into being (with average one new country per less than 1.5 a year!). The newly created states can be divided into those who have returned to pre – owned sovereignty and those who received it for the first time.

States that in the 90s of the 20th Century or in early 21st Century have returned to the pre – owned sovereignty (even for a short period), can in turn be divided into those who have lost it before as a result of annexation/ incorporation/ union (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the twentieth century, Czech Republic in the seventeenth century, Croatia in the eleventh/ twelfth century, possibly the Czech Republic³) and those which after World War I abandoned it in favour of a common state with other nations (Serbia, Montenegro). Nations (basically means the people) which after 1989 gained the sovereignty for the first time in the history were following: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Slovakia⁴, Slovenia, Macedonia (as a state of Slavs), Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Let us note that – with the exception of Kosovo – all

¹ Poland, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Albania

² Between years 1990-2008 following countries have emerged on the political map of Europe: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Moldova, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo

³ Formally the Czech Republic is a new state, because the decay of Czechoslovakia was not due to the secession of Slovakia, so in result of it, the Czech Republic did not get all heritage of the State disbanded on January 1, 1993. In the symbolic layer we can see, however, many references to Czechoslovakia, which was perceived on the traditionally Czech lands as it was the Czech Republic "extended" by the Slovak lands and Carpathian Ruthenia earlier.

⁴ It is important to note that the Slovak Republic (constitutional name of Slovak State) in the period from 1939 to 1945 was not a sovereign state.

newly nationalised nations belong to the group of Western, Eastern and Southern Slavs. It means that at the turn of the 20th and 21st Century we witness in Europe a process that can be described as a "*Slavic revival*" on the ruins Pan – Slavic ideology.

As far as this voice is concerned in the debate on perceptions of twenty years of the Slovak independence, I would like to look at the socio – political processes in Slovakia from three perspectives: (a) certain similarities between Slovakia and other countries of the region, (b) the features distinguishing Slovakia on background of socio – political changes in Central and Eastern Europe, (c) perceiving Slovak problems from the Polish perspective.

1 Comparison of Slovakia to other Countries in the Region: Similarities

In the context of the above-mentioned processes, Slovakia is not a unique case in the region we are interested in. More than half of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe are the young ones. In fact, only three countries: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic can boast relatively long (for this part of Europe) traditions of the state⁵. It means that probably many identity dilemmas relating to both institutions of state itself and historical and contemporary conditions of the nation are common to Slovaks and other "*young*" nations (states) of Central and Eastern Europe. Let's look at them.

In this group of countries we can see a very strong tendency to invent "*useful past*", to search national genesis in the early Middle Ages, and even in the ancient times (see: Macedonia, Romania). The living proof of the national megalomania are historical atlases (especially school ones) in which we encounter various attempts to minimise the complexes of the young (and except Ukraine – also small) nations by showing quite fantastic borders of "*ethnic*

⁵ Poland has the longest traditions of the state in Central and Eastern Europe (X / XI - XVIII centuries), remaining in the union with Lithuania (Grand Duchy of Lithuania) in the 14th Century, then the Czech Republic (X / XI - XVI / XVII Century), Hungary (X / XI - XVI Century). Loss of a separate state (political sovereignty) occurred: in the case of Poland in 1795, the Czech Republic - 1620 Hungary - 1526. The Hungarians did not have their own state by 341 years, the Czechs for 298 years (if you consider Czechoslovakia by the country in which the Czech people have political subjectivity). The Poles did not have their own state only for 123 years. By comparison, the Lithuanians were deprived of state for the longest time (although on the other hand the Republic was considered as the Polish-Lithuanian state) - 533 years, the Bulgarians - 510 years, the Serbs - 489 years.

territory" and "*nationalisation*" of ancient and early medieval, multi – ethnic and multi – cultural entities of state (Great Moravian Empire, Kievan Rus, Great Macedonia, Illyria).

The fate of national minorities is particularly complex and difficult in these countries (the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multinational country does not fit this classification). Their members become the convenient "*whipping boy*" (a typical "*scapegoat*" of the transformation) for the local political elites trying to authenticate themselves to their electorate. Often they are former communists, who, through an aggressive nationalist rhetoric, try to mend their political biography and regain the lost credibility.

One of the most pressing political issues in the newly established countries is the first language. Among the elite and ordinary citizens there is very actual and strong belief that there is no nation without a specific language, which is the basis of private and public way of communication, the famous slogan of count I. **Széchenyi**: "*The people live through their language!*" (Niederhauser, 1981, p. 45) However, a serious problem that local political and intellectual elites have to face is a close relationship with the languages of the neighbouring nations (Ukraine – Belarus –Russia, Moldova – Romania, Macedonia – Bulgaria, Slovakia – Czech Republic). Even greater problem is the identity of the language seen in the Bosnian language being de facto a kind of the Serbian – Croatian language with mixture of small set of words of Turkish origin⁶. This problem can be seen even more significantly in the case of the Montenegrin language (one of the four official languages in Montenegro)⁷, which practically does not differ from the Serbian – Croatian language. This means that the construction of national identity based on the mother tongue meant as a sign of the difference in the above-mentioned countries is a very difficult task that requires a large commitment of both topical linguists who agree to be experts in language formations and political elites.

In all previously mentioned countries we observe real "*rash*" of the national monuments depicting national heroes or symbols identified with the given particular nation (in Slovakia: the two–barred cross and the figures of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, among the Albanians – a Skanderbegs monument, among Hungarians – mythical turul, among Macedonians – monument of Alexander the

⁶ Bosnian language has gained the status of the state language in the mid 1990s of the last century.

⁷ Montenegrin language is in accordance with the Constitution of Montenegro (2007) one of the four official languages, alongside with the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian.

Great, etc.). It is not difficult to find even one newly erected monument even in the smallest town of the county. In areas with mixed ethnic the "monument wars" occur regularly. Monuments and commemoration plaques serve the function of "border posts" and there are determinants of ethnic (not administrative and political) membership of the given territory.

The typical feature for the "young" countries of Central and Eastern Europe is the obsessive suspicion towards almost all neighbouring states and peoples. What was feared the most was that the sovereignty of the newly established state can be challenged by the governments of the other countries they were often arguing with: starting from territorial and the economic disputes and ending on the dispute concerning the common history.

There is no coincidence in the fact that some of the newly established countries had the major problems with obeying the principles of a democratic rule of law, and especially respecting the rights of minorities at least in the initial period of their existence. Slovenia can be the exception here, because this country completed the full transformation of its political system and socio – economic development relatively soon. On the other hand, we can find the Balkan countries, especially Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo. We can include the Slovak Republic until 1998 to this list, with some reservations however. The Baltic Republics are situated in the middle of this classification.

2 Comparison of Slovakia to other Countries in the Region: the Differences

Undoubtedly, the process of formation of the Slovak Republic shows a lot of similarities with analogical processes taking place in other countries. Such parallels can be traced to a number of other issues not mentioned above, but I'm interested in a reply to a question: So what is the specificity of the Slovak identity creation process after the fall of the Communism? Based on my analysis of the Slovak political discourse in the years 1989 – 2004 (Zenderowski, 2007), I will try to indicate some fundamental differences.

Slovaks, of all Slavs, relatively late (?) split the ideology (illusion) of the Pan – Slavic cultural and political community. It refers to the unity of all Slavs regardless – what is very important – their cultural and religious orientation, and political systems. Furthermore, in the mid-1990s there were many warm declarations of friendship formulated and addressed towards Russia (hence the

fears of some people that Slovakia could become a Russian "Trojan horse" in the European Union). The similarity in the Pan – Slavic attitude of newly state – formed the Bosnian Serbs, the Belarusians and the Macedonians is apparent, in view of the fact, that the primary value in the mentioned cases is the Orthodox community "with momentum" is synonymous with Slavic one. Both facts (Pan – Slavism and pro – Russian attitude) negatively affected the crystallisation process of Slovaks feeling that they are different from others as a nation.

Slovaks are probably only one of recently nationalised state, whose members are so deeply divided in their opinion concerning the most important events of the 20th Century. This is particularly evident in the ambivalent attitude to the two opposite, historical facts, such as, on the one hand, the existence of the Slovak State dependent on the Third Reich (1939 – 1945) and the Slovak National Uprising (1944), which significantly contributed to its downfall. Indeed, a similar problem concerning the World War Two can be observed in the case of the Croats, but it seems that in the case of Slovakia, it is much more controversial.

Slovaks as the only newly "nationalised" state parted with much important and stronger partner, the Czech Republic, in a peaceful manner, on the basis of the bilateral agreement, which was pointed out as a model for other separatist movements in Central and Eastern Europe. The most important is the fact that later the Czechs, as a stronger partner, have not shown any virtual efforts to regain control over their "younger brother". In other cases, even if the release from the clutches of a stronger partner followed by his consent (at the time of his evident weakness), later numerous attempts to regain control of the lost area were observed (post – Soviet countries cases).

Unlike other nations liberated from the guardianship of "older / big brother", the Slovaks from the perspective of several years of living in a sovereign country, they can generally coldly, without emotion appreciate the advantages and benefits of co – existence in one state with the Czechs. Not forgetting the obvious disadvantages of the last 75 years of coexistence (with a break for the World War Two) with the Czechs, the Slovaks note that it enabled: first of all – overcoming the political and cultural domination of the Hungarians, secondly – and it has created an important impetus for development, so that the Slovaks are now one of the fastest developing nations of Europe. Despite the positive evaluation of a Slovak – Czech relationship, however, there is no desire in returning to Czechoslovakia at all. In the process of the formation of the modern Slovak national identity, we see a phenomenal process of departing from the

picture of "Czech opponent", quite common at the beginning of the 1990s, to quite settled picture of "Czech friend" at the beginning of the 21st Century (the unimaginable thing as far as Serbian – Croatian and Estonian – Russian relationships are concerned). In the other countries (e.g., Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus) a kind of nostalgia for the former federation also can be observed, but it has a completely different meaning. It concerns the loss of power, social benefits or some specific characters that are regarded as being friendly towards the given nation (see: Tito – nostalgia in Macedonia and Bosnia).

Slovaks among newly nationalised states are the exception when it comes to the issue of relationship between the religious and national identity. In other cases, one religion is an unquestioned (even by non-believers) pillar of the national identity. It is particularly true in the case of the Croats, the Macedonians, the Belarusians or the Moldovans (Ukrainian identity seems more complex). And although nowadays in Slovakia Catholicism remains the dominant religion, still major role in the Slovaks' beliefs play the conviction about unprecedented several centuries' long "coalition" of Catholicism and Protestantism in order to maintain the national unity. Besides, contemporary confessional identity is not as well linked to national identity as it previously used to be.

The Slovaks, unlike other newly nationalised southern Slavs (the Croats, the Slovenes) generally do not give their people the role of the "Latin bulwark", "defender of the West", etc. The Slovaks perceive their civilising mission rather as a "bridge" between the two European traditions – the Orthodox – Byzantine and Latin (the best example is the cult of St. Cyril and St. Methodius). At the same time, the Slovenes try to protect themselves in every possible way from the "cursed Balkans" (also from the Croats), and the Croats are trying to prove Europe that the Balkans stretches from Vukovar and Dubrovnik on the territories inhabited by the Serbs, the Montenegrins and the Albanians. And they (the Croats) are a heroic outpost of the West (Ugrešić, 2006).

3 Slovakia and the Slovaks from the Perspective of its Northern Neighbour

Polish Geopolitics and Foreign Policy

Short reflections concerning Polish perception of the Slovak issues should begin with a statement saying that Polish politicians are not interested in Slovakia

and what is happening in Slovakia. An exception to this rule was the period of the presidency of **L. Kaczyński**, who, on the one hand, was trying to build an alliance with the countries on the east of Poland (it was directed against a resurrection of Russia's imperial policy), on the other hand – he was trying to create the actual forum, not just the "café" cooperation of nations of Central Europe, especially the countries of the so-called Visegrad Group. In recent years, again, we observe a certain indifference towards our southern neighbours, besides the Polish foreign policy is back on its track regarding geopolitical orientation to the East – West. In part, this is due to historical experience and geopolitical position of Poland, situated on the lowlands between Germany and Russia, and partly it is due to the assumption that the line of the Carpathians and the Sudeten establishes the border of the Polish political influences. In the first case, the main role is played by the fear of the imperial Russian policy which seeks to undermine the sovereignty of Poland and the will to permanently integrate with the West, perceived as a guarantor of Polish sovereignty. In the second case, there is a strong conviction prevailing among Polish political elites that on the south of these mentioned mountain ranges there is, from the historical point of view – the zone of political dominance of Habsburgs, Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Czechs.

4 Slovakia and the Slovaks from the Perspective of the Social Imagination

We can safely state that Slovakia is known better by the Polish tourists than the Polish politicians. The image of the Slovakia is very positive and the Slovaks together with the Czechs (there is still a habit to link these two nations in the public imagination, although we are all aware of the fact that the Czechoslovakia does not exist anymore) are the leaders in the positive perception of other nations ranking. In a study in early 2013 the Slovaks have ranked in second place behind the Czechs (51% of positive responses) with the score of 48%. It is worth noting that on the threshold of independence it was only 33%! The percentage of people who declare their resentment towards the Slovaks decreased from 27% in 1993 to 13% in 2013. (Rogulska, 2013) It can be said that the listings of Slovakia and the Slovaks would probably be even better if they were more willing to travel further north than to the markets in Cieszyn and Nowy Targ. It could be difficult to "weaken" tourist holiday orientation concentrated on Croatia, Bulgaria, Italy, Greece (as well as Hungary

and the Czech Republic), in favour of Podlasie, Mazury and Polish Pomerania. Some hopes, however, can be connected to the modernisation (a little bit sluggish, but progressive) of the Polish road and railway network – the authorities announced that in the near future travelling from Katowice to Gdansk by modern train would take less than five hours. Taking into consideration time, the cost of travel and the relatively favourable pricing, Poland has a chance to win Slovak tourists. The only question is the quality of Polish tourism promotion in Slovakia.

5 The Image of Slovakia in the Polish Media

To conclude, I would like to appeal to the results of my researches concerning the media image of Slovakia in the main Polish electronic media (TV and radio) in the period from May 15th to August 15th, 2004. This is obviously only a look from *"mid – point"* of the discourse of the last twenty years, but it is worth to recall these results briefly. During my researches, I focused on three things: (a) recognition, (b) attitude towards Slovakia and the Slovaks, (c) an assessment of the foreign policy. The results were compared to the results relating to the Czech Republic.

6 Recognition

Slovakia, enjoying a less interests than the Czech Republic, due to the type of information provided about this country (economics and military affairs as the main areas of interest of the public and commercial media), distinguish from the Czech Republic qualitatively (in the case of the Czech Republic political affairs were exposed strongly). Without a doubt, it is serves the emancipation of the image of that country, until recently, mixed up with the Czech Republic (especially in the West, but also in Poland). The picture of internal affairs in Slovakia is less clear. It is difficult in this case to talk about a clear image. In the study, individual public broadcasters, but especially commercial ones, are not generally interested in Slovakia as such, recognising it as a country of little interest and having little importance in international politics. The only exception was the information concerning the rapid economic development in Slovakia. (Zenderowski, 2011)

7 The Perspective of the View and Attitude towards its Southern Neighbours

The Czech and the Slovak countries are often perceived as representatives of a large nation, which essentially "*is playing in a different league*" and has other interests (although for political purposes unity can be seen). Sometimes it seems that as a nation consisting of 38 million people, we can afford being not interested in matters concerning our little neighbours, the simplified vision of their history and their present day and finally the notorious twisting their forenames and the names of their cities and towns (while, the Czechs and the Slovaks generally are trying to write and pronounce Polish words correctly!). It does not mean, as one might think, neither neglecting, nor contemptuous attitude towards the Czechs and the Slovaks. In the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in Poland, we are dealing with a kind of mixture of patronising, indulgent (we as a great Central European, or rather the central – eastern European nation) – on the one hand, and a variety of jealousy and complexes manifested mainly in the sphere of economics and sports – on the other hand. To a large extent, the image of these countries is connected to polonocentric theory; in this view, unfortunately, Poland usually does not do well (if it is only in the sphere of international politics). Both states are perceived by the majority of Polish radio and television broadcasters (especially TVP1, TVP3, PR1 and PR3), whose messages were analysed, both in terms of Polish partners in regional cooperation, as well as countries competing with Poland for example: for foreign investments or for other countries favour. This kind of competition is, however, not devastating; it is carried out in the framework of generally accepted rules of the "*international game*". The information presented create an image of the two countries as being close, friendly and open towards Poland and international cooperation. Many common cultural features can be seen and the similarities of political goals are mentioned. Sometimes the "*ridiculous*" local customs are pointed out, but this fact arouses sympathy rather than contempt. Generally it can be said that the two countries are seen in strongly positive way – the Czech Republic more than Slovakia (similar trend can be observed recently, moreover, in public opinion polls). However, it seems that the main reason of our positive attitude towards the Czechs results from greater knowledge about their country, and a tendency to bestow more sympathy on the nations and countries more advanced in economic development. (Zenderowski, 2011, p. 237-238)

Conclusion: The Assessment of Slovakia's Foreign Policy

With regard to international politics in the public and commercial media, it is noted that the Czech Republic, despite its relatively small territory and the demographic potential, is trying to take an active part in the international politics, while Slovakia is considered as a country that tries to profitably integrate only in a particular system of political, economic and military forces. Both countries (especially the Czech Republic) are at the same time quite sceptical about the Polish role as a regional power and a leader in Central Europe. This may result from the tendency of the Czechs to play a vanguard role of the economic and cultural changes in Central Europe. (Zenderowski, 2011, p. 238)

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