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**BOOK REVIEW: SLAVDOM IN EUROPE, EUROPE IN
SLAVDOM. A VISION OF THE MODERNISATION OF SLAVS
BY ŠTEFAN LAUNER**

Renáta Bzdilová - Gabriel Eštok*

GBÚROVÁ, M.: *Slavdom in Europe, Europe in Slavdom. A Vision of the Modernisation of Slavs by Štefan Launer*. Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2015. 116 p. ISBN 978-3659-71462-7.

During her career as a political scientist, **Marcela Gbúrová** has devoted considerable attention to the questions of national and civic identity, interethnic communication and the history of Slovak political thought. She has published several monographs, papers, scholarly and popular science articles, in Slovakia as well as abroad. It is her three books, however, that deserve particular attention. In 1986, her debut *Between Identity and Integrity* ('*Medzi identitou a integritou*') addressed the theoretical and terminological aspects of interethnic communication from the perspective of the political and social reality of the post-communist countries after 1990. Her next two books – *Contacts with Politics* ('*Dotyky s politikou*', Trenčín 2002) and *Between the National and the Civil. Slovak experience* (Prešov 2004) – explore ethnicity and politics within the historical context of the creation of Slovak society and political elite during the 19th Century, focusing on the generation of Ľudovít Štúr and his contemporaries, and on the one that preceded them, known as the 'Všeslávia' generation.

The initial impulse for **Marcela Gbúrová's** most recent book came directly from the publisher. Her paper published in the Slovak Journal of Political Sciences (Liberalism According to Štefan Launer or On an Ethno-Emancipation

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Theory. Slovak Journal of Political Sciences. 2013, Volume 14, Issue 2, Pages 122 – 149.) captured the attention of Lambert, a well-known German publishing house. They were particularly intrigued by her analysis of the linguistic and political controversy between two Slovak intellectuals, Ľudovít Štúr and Štefan Launer, from the standpoint of German philosophers' national emancipation theories.

Published in English, the present book delves into the subject more deeply than the original paper. In three extensive chapters, the author sets out to outline the life of Štefan Launer and his activities within the national revival movement during the revolutionary decade of the 1840s, which saw the projects of political and social modernisation clash with those of national emancipation. On one hand, there were initiatives for the reform of the government, the political and legal system, and on the other movements that aimed at national revival. National revival projects that focused on the establishment of cultural and political institutions were, as **Gbúrová** emphasises, directly following in the footsteps of Herder's pro-Slavic sentiments and national individualism and Hegel's views on history, which proved relevant within the context of the multinational kingdom of Hungary. Here, the politically neutral, peaceful and non-aggressive Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of the individuality of nations nonetheless acquired political connotations and led to the constitution of ethnic minorities and the rise and growth of ethnic nationalist movements that took the shape of linguistic nationalisms. The work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, on the other hand, was perceived primarily through his belief that history is shaped by historic, sovereign nations that have for ages been passing the baton of leadership in the quest for civilisation and progress to one another. This idea proved inspiring for the leaders of large nations that had not yet made their mark in history as well as for the elites of the smaller ones that also hoped to make their contribution to the ongoing debate about the progress of humanity.

The present publication reopens the debate about the early 19th Century Slovak intellectual elite's political thought, which sought to comprehend Herder's and Hegel's concepts, as well as the ideas of other leading European intellectuals of that period. They were at the same time engaged in the search for the perspectives for the future of the Slovak nation and its place in Hungary, Slavdom and Europe. The intellectuals engaged in this debate were, it should be noted, a diverse group, representing a broad spectrum of political and social opinions, the modes of socialisation and views regarding the era of Romanticism, the geopolitical space of Central Europe, Hungarian territorial

nationalism, civic modernisation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the outcomes of the 1848-1849 revolution. Their attitudes towards the concept of Slavic reciprocity differed considerably, with some favouring Austro-Slavism, which others considered an outdated cultural and political idea. The third approach, the one supported by the leading figure of the Slovak ethnic emancipation movement, Ľudovít Štúr, pinned its hopes on the Eastern Slavic concept under the Russian leadership. What these intellectuals, educated at prestigious Austrian or German universities, had in common was their shared educational background, which had also provided them with ample opportunities to meet the intellectual elite of other national groups of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the wider, predominantly Slavic, community. This experience was the source of inspiration they later sought to further develop in their domestic environment.

This dimension of the Slovak political thought of the 1840s is, as **Gbúrová** observes, most noticeable in the controversies and plans for the modernisation of the Slavic world, authored by Ľudovít Štúr and Štefan Launer, who represent two distinct planes of modernism. The reason why the monograph devotes more space to Štefan Launer is twofold. First, Ľudovít Štúr's position of the leader of the mid 19th Century Slovak national revival and the codifier of the Slovak language has been well-documented in a large number of works published in Slovakia as well as abroad, analysing his contribution from the perspective of political science, cultural studies, history, philosophy, linguistics and literature. Štefan Launer, on the other hand, was a major opponent of Štúr's linguistic nationalism and has since been given predominantly negative presentation, due largely to his opposition to Štúr's codification initiative of 1843. He was, furthermore, a proponent of Hungarian liberal political modernism, a philosophy that Štúr's followers found unacceptable. The second reason for the present monograph focusing primarily on Štefan Launer is his theory of ethnic modernisation which, since the time of its publication to this day, has failed to attract sufficient interest.

According to **M. Gbúrová**, Launer's is an interesting philosophy of history, inspired by Hegel and presented to Slovak readers in 1847. The author focused on the Slavs and their cultural emancipation. Unlike his Russophile colleagues and the proponents of Romantic Messianism, Launer did not see Slavic nations as the sole bearers of civilisation and culture but rather as peoples in need of adopting the standards already established by the four Western European nations – the Germans, English, French and Italians. He

firmly believed that the Slavs would only be able to rise to the same level of culture and civilisation once sufficiently acquainted with the Western European spiritual and educational principles. It was this approach, as well as his liberal conviction that political and linguistic rights of the Slovaks should be grounded in Hungarian constitutional patriotism and the belief in the productivity of civic rights and liberties, that has rendered him deeply unpopular among the representatives of Slovak national movement, who saw him as a renegade and a traitor to national and Slavic ideals.

The revolution of 1848-1849 proved that Ľudovít Štúr and his colleagues had been right in their choice of a radical linguistic reform as the path towards the formation of national identity. It was the language that managed to sustain collective ethnic awareness and fuel further homogenisation of the Slovaks in the difficult political circumstances that followed. However, as the author points out, the failure to realise their vision of Slovak nation within the Hungarian monarchy became the source of major disappointment, even fatalistic tendencies, among the leaders of Slovak national revival. The revolution had disrupted the evolutionary logic of their concept. Štúr himself shifted his focus to Slavdom as the post-revolutionary civilisation paradigm, a concept that he explored in his work *Slavdom and the World of the Future* (*Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti*). Rejecting the Western paradigm entirely, it presents his vision for a Slavic state ruled by the Russian autocratic regime. His Slavic pan-Russian perspective is at odds with the liberal political modernism based on the respect for an individual and the universal nature of human rights and liberties advocated by Štefan Launer.

The author concludes her study of Š. Launer by emphasising that, from our contemporary point of view, it was the path that he proposed, a path based on the rational dimension of the philosophy of European history, which has proved to be more productive for the Slavic nations. Succumbing neither to the Russophile nor pan-Slavic unifying tendencies of his contemporaries, Launer countered them by his vision of European integration. The process that he envisioned was to be conducted in two steps, the first of which was the elevation of the Slavic nations to the cultural and civilisation level already achieved by the peoples of the Western Europe, a goal that could only be accomplished through education and the study of their culture, literature and technology. Only then would the Slavic nations be ready for the second step, which was to be one of mutual enrichment, stemming from the principles of the original shared culture – a principle adopted by the European Union.

M. Gbúrova's book offers a scholarly perspective on sensitive issues of the 19th Century Slovak national identity and deserves special recognition for its discovery of Štefan Launer, an enlightened rationalist and liberal thinker, whose personal story proves that, as **Gbúrova** reminds us, the so-called fringe opinions regarding crucial aspects of our civilisation need not necessarily be short-lived.