

**NATIONAL POPULISM  
AND SLOVAK – HUNGARIAN  
RELATIONS IN SLOVAKIA  
2006 – 2009**

EDITED by: KÁLMÁN PETŐCZ

Forum Minority Research Institute  
Šamorín – Somorja, 2009

Lectors:

Miroslav Kusý

Michal Vaščečka

Robert Žitňanský

This publication appears thanks to the support  
of the Open Society Institute, Budapest  
(in the frame of the project *Challenging National Populism and  
Promoting Interethnic Tolerance and Understanding in Slovakia*)

© Authors, 2009

© Forum Minority Research Institute, 2009

Translation © Daniel Borský

ISBN: 978-80-89249-37-4

# CONTENT

Introduction.....	9
Peter Učech: Approaching National Populism.....	13
National Populism at Large.....	13
Populism in Focus.....	16
Nationalism Under Suspect.....	20
Post-Communist National Populism in Action.....	22
Framework for the Post-Communist Populism.....	23
Implications of the Chosen Classification.....	26
Slovak National Populist Moment.....	28
National Populism “Light”?.....	31
Conclusion.....	34
Grigorij Mesežnikov: National Populism in Slovakia – Defining the Character of the State and Interpreting Select Historic Events.....	39
National Populism and the Context of its Existence in Slovakia.....	39
Protagonists of National Populism.....	41
Defining the Character of the State.....	45
Interpretation of Select Historic Events.....	53
Future Prospects Regarding Activities of National Populists in Slovakia.....	61
Kálmán Petőcz: Slovakia since 2004 – National Populism and the Hungarian Issue.....	67
Slovakia’s Entry to EU and NATO: a Turning Point.....	67
Parliamentary Elections in 2006: Deterioration of Slovak–Hungarian Relations.....	69
Change in SMK–MKP Leadership: New Ammunition for National Populists.....	72

Year 2008: Strengthening Slovak National Identity	
Leads to <i>déjà vu</i> of 1993–1998 .....	75
Year 2009: Reaching the Historical Bottom or Hoping	
for Improvement? .....	81
Conclusion.....	92
<b>Kálmán Petőcz: National Populism and Electoral Behaviour.....</b>	<b>99</b>
Defining the Terms of Southern Slovakia, Ethnically	
Mixed Territory and Territory Inhabited	
by Ethnic Hungarians .....	104
Electoral Behaviour of Slovaks Living on Ethnically	
Mixed Territories .....	109
Comparison of Presidential Elections in 2009 and Parliamentary	
Elections in 2006 in Southern Slovakia on the Level	
of Districts.....	111
Comparison of Presidential Elections in 2009 and 1999 on the	
Level of Districts .....	119
Comparison of Presidential Elections in 2009 and Parliamentary	
Elections in 2006 in Southern Slovakia on the Level	
of Municipalities .....	126
Electoral Behaviour Patterns of Slovaks from Micro-Regions	
in South-Western Slovakia.....	126
Electoral Behaviour Patterns of Slovaks from Micro-Regions	
in Central and Eastern Part of Southern Slovakia .....	136
Electoral Behaviour of Residents of Towns Located	
on Ethnically Mixed Territory .....	146
Electoral behaviour of ethnic Hungarians.....	157
Conclusion.....	160
<b>Zsuzsanna Mészáros–Lampl: Magyars and Slovaks in Southern</b>	
Slovakia – Exercising Language Rights .....	167
Dominant Communication Language .....	168
Family Communication in Respondents’ Childhood.....	168
Family Communication Today .....	170
Extra-Family or Public Communication Today.....	173
Slovaks’ Views Regarding Opportunities to Use their Native	
Language in Southern Slovakia .....	176
Discrimination and its Causes .....	178

Zsolt Gál: Argentina on the Danube – Populist Economic Policy as the Biggest Enemy of Sustainable Economic Growth.....	181
Phenomenon of Populist Economic Policy.....	183
Total Ineffectiveness and Harmfulness of Populist Economic Policy in CEE Countries.....	189
Sources of Populism on the Demand Side: Voters’ Rationality and Irrationality.....	198
Conclusion.....	212
Miroslav Kocúr: For God and Nation: Christian National Populism .....	221
National Populism and Christian Churches.....	222
Slovak Catholic Hierarchy and Some Concrete Causes.....	223
Tiso and the Slovak State.....	224
New Trnava Archbishop and his Reflection on Tiso’s Attitudes.....	227
Hungarian Bishop.....	228
Celebrations of Constantine and Methodius and Concrete Double Crosses.....	229
Nationalization vs. Globalization.....	230
Religion and Politics.....	233
Globalization, Universalism and Christianity.....	234
Religious and National Identity – a Change in Paradigms.....	237
Final Observations and Proposed Solutions.....	238
Conclusion.....	242
László Öllös: Time for Hungarian–Slovak Dialogue (Conclusion).....	247
ANNEX.....	267
Kálmán Petőcz: Most Frequent Stereotypes Concerning Slovak–Hungarian Relations Used in National Populist Rhetoric.....	269
<i>Stereotype 1: Above-standard rights</i> .....	269
<i>Stereotype 2: Hungarian threat</i> .....	276
<i>Stereotype 3: Collaboration</i> .....	279
<i>Stereotype 4: Loyalty</i> .....	280
<i>Stereotype 5: Geographic names must be in state language</i> .....	282
<i>Stereotype 6: Reciprocity</i> .....	285
<i>Stereotype 7: Ethnic party is obsolete</i> .....	295

Mária Vrabec: The Case of Hedviga Malinová – Chronology, Implications and Lessons .....	299
Bibliography.....	339
List of Abbreviations .....	353
Authors.....	355

# LÁSZLÓ ÖLLÖS:

## TIME FOR HUNGARIAN–SLOVAK DIALOGUE (CONCLUSION)

Looking at the results of the most recent elections to the European Parliament, an impartial observer might well conclude that mutual Hungarian–Slovak reconciliation has not been as out of reach since 1989 as it is today.<sup>1</sup> For three years before these elections, Hungary’s political and public life had been confronted with phenomena such as harsh anti-Hungarian lashes by the Slovak National Party (SNS) Chairman Ján Slota, overall policies of the Slovak Government predetermined by his party’s priorities, validation of the Beneš decrees by a resolution passed in the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the case of Hedviga Malinová, thrashing of football fans in Dunajská Streda by the police, campaign before the most recent presidential elections and generally intensified anti-Hungarian sentiments in Slovakia. Hungary’s political leaders as well as the public opinion followed these developments with astonishment, mostly because the party representing ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia, namely the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK–MKP), had been an important part of the ruling coalition for eight years and played a key role in toppling the authoritarian administration of Vladimír Mečiar, restoring the country’s democratization process, facilitating its accession to the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) and the European Union (EU) and implementing successful structural and economic reforms.

Except minor mistakes, Hungary’s political leaders reacted to intensified attacks by relatively astute manoeuvring. After a long time, the opposition and the government stopped publicly attacking each other in order to make foreign policy problems become domestic political issues. One might even say that if it was not for the minor mistakes and a handful of far-right formations, Hungary might have celebrated a resounding diplomatic success in the squabble provoked by the Slovak side. But it didn’t. The far-right sub-

jects have become a stable part of political life in Slovakia as well as in Hungary, and this is not likely to change too soon. Another problem awaiting solution is the Forum of Hungarian Deputies of the Carpathian Basin. Last but not least, the Hungarian side must ask itself a question of how the Slovak public perceives the fruits of its policies.

On the other hand, even the previously unseen cooperation between the government and the opposition in Hungary cannot camouflage the fact that for two decades since the social change of 1989, Hungary's political leaders along with political representatives of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia have been unable to come up with solutions to problems of the Hungarian minority that would stand a chance to succeed. Consequently, they have been unable to raise mutual Slovak–Hungarian relations from the level of virtual cold war into a level of such peace that could be understood and embraced by the majority of both nations.

Looking back, even the referendum on double citizenship seems as the bottom of one crisis process rather than the pinnacle of one development stage. The Hungarian national thought still does not seem to have overcome this crisis. Already at the Monor negotiations, the most important streams of the Hungarian underground tried to reach a consensus over rejecting the communist regime and helping ethnic Hungarians abroad. But the Monor agreement did not last even until the first free elections.<sup>2</sup> From this point on, the issue of ethnic Hungarians became part of internal political and power struggle, particularly during election campaigns; in other words, it became a tool to defeat political opponents.

One of prevailing strategies of the post-Monor period was that of force. It was based on an assumption that it was possible to force neighbouring countries to granting autonomy for ethnic Hungarians living on their territories, recognizing their language as an official language and providing them with everything else ethnic minorities need to survive. Advocates of this strategy believed they did not need to take into account the public opinion in neighbouring countries because for them the principal path to success was not persuasion but (political) pressure. They argued that aggressive anti-Hungarian sentiment was the fundamental element of neighbouring nations' national consciousness and as such it could not be uprooted; therefore, one must create conditions to apply pressure in order to achieve the desired objective.

But if the Hungarians' image in neighbouring nations is truly full of anxiety and unchangeable aggressiveness, then a pressure from abroad may only be successful only if the threat it implies is greater than the imaginary threat posed by ethnic Hungarians themselves; in other words, if the exter-



nal danger exceeds the alleged danger of ethnic Hungarians disrupting the state's territorial integrity. For this pressure to be effective, it is necessary to demonstrate the actual danger of disintegration and separation of some of its territories and only then compare it to the consequences of granting full-fledged rights to ethnic Hungarians. Only in this kind of comparison does granting of full-fledged minority rights represent a lesser 'threat'.

Even in the past, this policy of force was way beyond Hungary's actual potential, let alone the facts that it would sharply contradict internal principles of the EU and that one NATO member state cannot pose a military threat to another NATO member state. Within the framework of allied systems Hungary has identified with, it is impossible to create a greater threat than the already existing anxiety about ethnic Hungarians. Therefore, pursuing solely the policy of force may bring partial – though often very important – achievements but not a fundamental turning point that would lead to equality and national freedom of ethnic Hungarians. The point is that pressure alone can never lead to reconciliation between two nations.

Advocates of the competitive strategy expected the democratization process to produce the critical change that could make neighbouring nations reconcile with their ethnic Hungarians and grant them full-fledged minority rights. They believed that if ethnic Hungarians' representatives played an active role in removing the communist dictatorship and in subsequent political and economic processes that led to establishing a liberal democratic regime, then at some point along the way majority nations could grant full-fledged minority rights to ethnic Hungarians and recognize their national equality. Meanwhile, it has become obvious that even participation in the democratization process cannot alone bring about a change in the majority nation's perception of ethnic Hungarians.

Furthermore, the case of Slovakia shows that democratization process is not necessarily linear but from time to time it sways toward authoritarianism, encouraging within public opinion anti-Hungarian sentiments full of anxiety, intolerance and distrust and thus playing into the hands of power centralization. When the democratization process advances linearly, ethnic minorities may achieve certain – even significant – progress in terms of their social status but not a fundamental turning point that would make neighbouring nations recognize the rights necessary for ethnic minorities' full-fledged development and essentially change their overall perception of the Hungarian nation. Most Slovaks' hostility and suspicion with respect to ethnic Hungarians will not easily change into friendship and trust.

An inevitable precondition to reconciliation is a change in the nation's system of values and even a change in the currently prevailing concept of

nation. This necessity is realized by only a handful of individuals who fail to spread the idea of change further.<sup>3</sup> Only precious moments of sincere political cooperation have produced such joint Slovak–Hungarian declarations that featured important elements of national reconciliation.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there have been attempts. In early 1990s, the issue of both countries' national future was discussed at many intellectual meetings. Unfortunately, these meetings and conferences could at best abrade the edges of antagonistic notions of nation but not change them essentially because these opinion exchanges failed to spark a general public debate. Consequently, these intellectuals and their views became isolated; even if some upholders of such views by chance made it to executive positions, they were soon steamrolled by advocates of harder or softer models of Slovak–Hungarian national hostility.

While these former intellectuals showed more tolerance and made various concessions with respect to members of ethnic minorities, their presence in executive power structures did not bring about an essential change. Coalition governments in Slovakia avoided an open public debate on fundamental issues of Slovak–Hungarian relations even when they comprised ethnic Hungarians' representatives. So it happened that the issue of mutual relations was appropriated by advocates of national exclusiveness who began to harp on about Hungarians' two-facedness, their historical sins, the Trianon trauma that determines their nature and actions, the assimilation of Slovaks in Hungary and their oppression in southern Slovakia, secret attempts to change state borders and called on the Slovak nation to come together and oust ethnic Hungarians along with more tolerant Slovaks – who were traitors in their eyes – from power. The state must be defended no matter what!

It seems that those who decided to rule the country jointly with ethnic Hungarians chose a wrong strategy. First, they refused to address the issue of ethnic Hungarians and let those who prefer authoritarianism to constitutional democracy and Russian and Chinese allies – let alone Milošević and some Muslim dictators – to Euro-Atlantic integration to take advantage. Later, when these politicians were forced to nail their colours to the mast, it turned out that – except rather isolated exceptions – they also viewed Hungary and Hungarians as a source of danger. In other words, they refused to take the bull by the horns not because they would not want to but because they knew they could not live up to the task.

In 2007, most of these politicians helped pass a parliament's resolution drafted by the SNS on the unalterable status of Beneš decrees. A year later, during the parliamentary debate on Kosovo independence, most speakers

conspicuously avoided addressing one of fundamental questions of constitutional democracy: shall the state have the right to demand loyalty from citizens it strives to massacre or drive them out of their homeland? A negative answer to this question would immediately lead to the issue of Beneš decrees. The declaration adopted by the Slovak parliament implies a positive though unspoken answer to this question: yes, the state shall have the right to demand loyalty also from those of its citizens who belong to the minority and who this very state intends to exterminate or drive them out in masses.

Combining the value systems of Hitlerism and Stalinism with various opinion streams that accept the concept of constitutionalism produces very peculiar kinds of social, Christian, civic, liberal and other democrats. This phenomenon may be observed not only in Slovakia but all over the ambiguous region of Central Europe, although the Hungarians became its most recent victims.

The principal message of the present study is that an ideology formed in such a utilitarian way can never change by itself. It can only be changed as a result of an open public debate in which the general public may learn about other viable alternatives. Those who stick to their democratic values may benefit from such a debate; on the other hand, the absence of a public debate in the world of relative values puts them in a disadvantage. The public debate is likely to catalyze self-reflection and self-correction of those who view their own interest as the ultimate value and are able to turn anything – including emerging aggressive national sentiments – to their advantage. Therefore, the public debate may weaken the social credit of aggressive national fanatics.

New values may only sprout in the public consciousness if they are openly advertised in a public debate. But if the discussion fails to evolve into a full-fledged public debate and remains in the domain of the political elite or isolated groups of intellectuals, the new values will only reach the public after they pass through various ideological filters.

So, there is no change in the system of values without an open public debate on these values. This is the principal message of Enlightenment. The problem is that aggressiveness of national states partly inhibited or redirected this process.

When one public opinion poll recently established that pupils of the final grade of Slovak primary schools consider ethnic Hungarians to be the most unlikeable category of non-Slovak fellow compatriots, many beheld the nightmare of future burdened by conflicts. One can ill turn a blind eye on the fact that Slovaks tend to view ethnic Hungarians with overt hostility.

ty or at least suspiciously. The reasons for this *status quo* do not merely include historic experience but also contemporary interests and prevailing opinion streams.

Our age is dominated by several ideological streams that view conflicts between individuals or entire social groups as the foundation of society and state. Although few leaders publicly subscribe to it, one of prevailing ideological streams in modern Slovakia that in many respects continues in the footsteps of the communist regime of Gustáv Husák is a stream that strives for dialectic update and preservation of the greatest possible number of original elements of Leninism that was ideologically rooted in Marxism. Under the pressure ensuing from the change of regime that inevitably made upholders of this ideology reject it formally, their objective has become to preserve as much of it as possible for the largest possible scope of subjects; in other words, the goal is to conserve the ideological content by altering its form. Political leaders confronted with ideological problems ensuing from the public's changing moods during the process of regime transformation may dialectically respond to them by embracing certain elements of ideological streams that are close to the original content or external formal elements of the given ideological stream.

If politicians are compelled to seek a new and effective form of class struggle against internal as well as external enemies (like Leninism managed to), it may result in most peculiar combinations. The Leninist understanding of philosophy-turned-ideology views the argumentation system a tool of attaining power goals. Its principal benchmark is the outcome, i.e. victory. In the context of this understanding, other ideologies may also prove to be formally effective in a modern society. Nationalism may be successfully mixed with socialism, some elements of fascism, early as well as late variants of elitism, utilitarianism, etc. The tradition of regional small producers' hostility with respect to tycoons and the tradition of politics for the people may complement the elite's notions about inevitability of class and national struggle.

The essence of these syntheses is the conviction that the history of mankind has always been propelled by struggle as opposed to peace, freedom, justice and cooperation. Many Slovak politicians and their ideological allies may rightfully believe that they owe their individual careers to this knowledge. It was this flexible ideological formula that made them abandon the once almighty Communist Party and continue their careers in a great multitude of new parties; that was what enabled them defeat their internal party rivals; last but not least, that was what allowed them to fan the flames of inherited emotions that will secure their voter support.

One of possible outcomes of these efforts is populism, which is a hotch-potch of ideologized value systems amalgamated by utilitarian needs and driven by the overriding concept of gaining and preserving power. To the droves of voters they otherwise despise, populist politicians sell the illusion of participation in political decision-making based on emotional identification. On the first glimpse, it is some kind of hybrid conservatism as the tools used by political leaders feature a much broader scope of political traditions compared to previous periods; on the other hand, the users of these tools do not feel bound by moral principles.

The backbone of populism is expedience, i.e. political success. In an ideal condition, it has two principal actors: first, a politician-entrepreneur who views the original ideas as a tool for progress and subscribes to the individualized idea of waging a permanent campaign against everybody; second, a crowd that supports such a politician, manipulated by the bureaucratic machinery that fulfils the role of an ideologist. For old-time politicians who sought their niche in the new social order, aggressive anti-minority nationalism that was amplified in the final stages of communism seemed to be the perfect tool to undermine revolutionaries' legitimacy and reinvent their own. On their quest, they found close allies among utilitarian upholders of the perished authoritarianism and heirs of fascist traditions.

Hungary's policy of pressure that does not strive to appeal to the Slovak public is absolutely expedient for these politicians; anytime they deem it necessary, they may point out the Hungarian neighbour's despotic behaviour. As long as the majority of political leaders endorse latently or overtly hostile attitudes with respect to another nation, this *status quo* cannot be changed even by government rotations conforming to the rules of constitutional democracy. The hostile attitudes cannot be eliminated by ethnic Hungarians' government participation, both countries' Euro-Atlantic integration, abolition of custom borders or expanding regionalism.

Constitutional value systems of political communities do not develop primarily as the consequence of violence that has befallen them. If it was so, each military conflict or war would put the communities involved to a qualitatively higher level of constitutionality thanks to violence alone. Much more important to development of political communities' constitutional value systems are new ideas as well as public debates and polemics on these ideas that in the ripe historical period appeal to the critical mass of society; along the same lines, the progress is a direct result of embracing new values that spread thanks to such discussions. This conclusion applies despite the undisputable fact that horrors of injustice and violence often provide the principal impulse to the birth and promulgation of new ideas.

As long as the mutual Hungarian–Slovak dialogue produces results that will be viewed as tangible by the critical mass of both countries' political communities, then those who prefer national reconciliation based on mutual justice to overt or latent hostility may prevail within both countries' electorates. These voters will seek to rid the political system of the burden of ethnic anxiety; however, they must be prepared for ruthless and relentless resistance to reconciliation as those who fan the flames of fear in both nations will be fully aware that the basic pillar of their legitimacy is being undermined.

But is the time ripe for this kind of change? Is the proper historic moment upon us? Let us take a look at what has changed compared to the system of relations established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most importantly, Hungary and Slovakia have become full-fledged members of NATO and the EU, which renders any attempts to change borders in a violent fashion impossible. Consequently, encouraging the feelings of threat does not support actual efforts to change national borders or prevent it for that matter. The only motive behind it is establishing or strengthening voters' irrational ties to political parties. In fact, most of these ghosts and apparitions are conjured up out of political reasons in order to gain power. On the other hand, the clash between political leaders' domestic interests and the reality also gives birth to the opposition that unmasks the attempts to encourage fears of changing borders. Nowadays, the Slovaks themselves believe that the Hungarian threat does not exist and that the notion is invoked by groups that find it expedient out of political reasons. In Slovakia's domestic politics, the 'Hungarian threat' has gradually become a power tool that lacks the actual threat and now serves a different purpose. As a result, the source of threat has become one of fundamental issues of democracy.

In the process of Slovak–Hungarian dialogue, it would be very desirable to acknowledge that the courage to concede historical wrongs and remove the disadvantaged status of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia does not threaten the state's unity in any way. Maintaining the state of ethnic inequality, obscuring past wrongs and inhuman acts and encouraging the majority's feeling of danger does not threaten state borders but the democratic system of values. Elimination of inequality is the moral right of the disadvantaged as well as the moral obligation of the privileged; however, the new constitutional value system must offer something extra also to those who were previously among the privileged. To them, relinquishing the national dominance does not imply uncertainty and danger, which is why their sacrifice is relative.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, relinquishing power privileges extends the scope of their own freedom and helps them build their own

future. If they are able to replace hostility toward another nation with alliance, then they themselves will become better, freer and richer; likewise, their national life will not become more endangered but more secure.

But in order to achieve a new state of affairs, Slovakia and its Hungarian neighbour must be bound together by something more than common economic interests or common NATO and EU membership. They must develop a close and special relation inspiring a mutual conviction that our allies would not threaten us even if they had an opportunity. A national advantage ensuing from an allied relation is rightfully considered more important than a national advantage acquired at the expense of others.

The Hungarians do not have to relinquish those forms of pressure that are internationally acceptable as they may well continue to be useful and effective. What they must give up is using ambiguous terms and ‘toying’ with the issue of border inviolability. A Central European ear is extremely sensitive to such ambiguities, particularly if two-facedness is typical for both sides of the issue.

Is it possible at all to conduct such a discussion with the political community of neighbouring states if it contradicts interests of a significant share of their political elite? Judging from options that were available in the past, the answer must be negative because basic national communication means were traditionally in the hands of national states.<sup>6</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though, this *status quo* is beginning to change: the Internet is getting out of control; many television and radio stations are not under immediate government control anymore; a certain segment of the print media is willing to provide space to such discussions.<sup>7</sup> In the age of international human rights conventions, national states are unable to restrict publication of books and magazines or distribution of films in neighbouring nations’ languages; within the EU, it is impossible to restrict imports of such merchandise by trade barriers. Innovation and price decline have become perpetual qualities of electronic media that allow for independent mass communication. National states’ power institutions can indeed be circumvented!

If citizens of Slovakia could receive information on each Slovak–Hungarian affair on an everyday basis sitting in front of their computers in the comfort of their homes; if tens and hundreds of thousands of people could read the works of Bibó, Jászi and other great thinkers of the past and – even more importantly – the works of contemporary Hungarian authors thanks to the Internet and electronic media; if droves of Slovak students and pupils were invited to Slovak–Hungarian cultural and social events (e.g. summer camps); if Hungarian authors regularly published their ideas in Slovak periodical press, then the task of anti-Hungarian ideologists would become infi-

ninitely more complicated. Therefore, it is highly desirable to spread the part of Hungarian culture that deals with mutual relations between Central European nations on a regular, as opposed to occasional, basis. It is also highly desirable to distribute studies, films, documentaries and everything that may further mutual understanding – all this in Slovak language, of course!

It is generally desirable that Hungarian culture and its personalities are presented in Slovak. Hungarian intellectuals should consider publishing their works also in neighbouring nations' languages because it is at least as important as publishing in world languages. The Hungarian nation lives and will continue to live in this region. Furthermore, the basis for Hungarian argumentation in potential discussions should not be grievances and wrongs of the Hungarians but those of the neighbouring nation – in this case the Slovaks – including prejudices of the nationalized public. After all, changing these prejudices should be the principal objective of such discussions.

The Slovak–Hungarian reconciliation would be necessary even if neighbouring countries were completely free of ethnic Hungarians. Members of ethnic minorities are not the only ones in need of national reconciliation, although they suffer the most from its absence. The point is that Hungarian constitutionality is not only related to constitutionality of neighbouring countries inhabited by ethnic Hungarians but directly concerns it. Both sides tend to believe that the other side is the source of national threat, which profoundly affects people's notions of nation and state, creation of the image of enemy, their concepts of preferred political systems and human rights of both the Hungarians and neighbouring nations.

Instead of hostility stemming from the feeling of threat, neighbouring states co-inhabited by ethnic Hungarians should embrace a long-term strategy of friendship with the Hungarians and alliance with Hungary. In order to launch a public debate on such a strategy, it must first be formulated.

The attempts to conjure up the apparition of Hungarian threat are not bound to encounter meaningful resistance until a new national doctrine is born. Without such a doctrine, even politicians with a moderate position on the so-called Hungarian issue can do nothing but pursue a more reasonable and more tactical minority policy that is accepted abroad and does not hamper the country's Euro-Atlantic integration but simultaneously preserves existing national inequality. So, although these politicians oppose harsh and aggressive anti-Hungarian sentiments,<sup>8</sup> they actually contribute to undermining ethnic minorities and even eliminating them in the long term.<sup>9</sup> Before their political supporters, they dissociate themselves from the radicals in terms of tactics but not in terms of the essence. While this political constellation does not prevent ethnic Hungarian parties from participating



in government, it is not likely to bring about national reconciliation because only tactical solutions available are those that in the given moment suit political interests of all those involved.<sup>10</sup> This kind of political situation usually produces arguments in favour of pursuing a ‘more cunning’ minority policy or furthering minority interests in a ‘more cunning’ way. Neither of the two approaches is likely to change the essence of mutual relations between the majority and the minority.

Still, it would be a grave mistake to underestimate the potential influence of ethnic Hungarians’ successful government participation on the overall system of values. Even though government participation is unable to change fundamental principles of minority policy by itself, it may substantially reduce negative feelings of the general public with respect to ethnic Hungarians. Successful members of the cabinet are free to develop important power positions and win recognition of the population group whose problems they are supposed to deal with. Government participation offers ethnic Hungarian politicians communication possibilities they could not hope for in the opposition, especially as members of the party that is widely viewed as an organization of the national enemy and therefore remains isolated even within the opposition. New communication channels provide ethnic Hungarian leaders with an opportunity to inform about problems of ethnic Hungarians the general public did not know about or its knowledge has been filtered by the national state. Effective communication could make the general public accept the situation in which ethnic Hungarians participate in tackling not only their specific problems but national problems as well. Yet, this acceptance does not imply perception of government participation as something ethnic Hungarians would be automatically entitled to.

In a word, government participation of ethnic Hungarians may constitute an important step toward national reconciliation as long as this administration is perceived positively; however, it fails to generate long-term solutions to most national problems of ethnic Hungarians unless there is an overall change in the nation’s image. Government participation itself is unable to change the image of ethnic Hungarians in the eyes of the majority. That is why aggressive anti-Hungarian sentiments become part of official government policies as soon as ethnic Hungarians are ousted from government.

So far, government ambitions of ethnic Hungarian political parties in Slovakia lacked a well-conceived plan to change the way the majority perceives ethnic Hungarians. While individual political leaders did show some effort, their isolated attempts never grew into joint, deliberate endeavour. Discussions on this issue were usually triggered by specific legislative initiatives or executive measures concerning ethnic Hungarians, i.e. when they

focused on concrete goals or interests of ethnic Hungarians, but much less frequently when they focused on more general problems such as power abuse and arrogance of politicians who based their authority and legitimacy largely on anti-Hungarian sentiments.<sup>11</sup>

Sticking to pragmatism, parties representing ethnic Hungarians focused rather on filling posts within public administration organs, strengthening minority cultural institutions and achieving their economic goals while avoiding debates their leaders viewed as ideological and futile. But there is an essential difference between ideological debates and discussions on the value system. While the former primarily serve the purpose of attaining power goals of politics, the latter may also be directed against power goals. In no case must such a dialogue become a political tool; on the contrary, it should create space for examining fundamental cohesion principles of society or a political community even when it contradicts power interests or even those of the majority.<sup>12</sup>

That is why politicians embedded in the value system of power are never able to participate in these discussions in a constructive way. A dialogue with them quickly turns ideological because they use it to strengthen their own power positions and undermine those of their opponents. Perhaps that is why the opinion confrontation with the majority's political representatives seemed ideological and – after several verbal squabbles that also featured some power elements – futile to ethnic Hungarian leaders who were after swift success and rapid results.

But it is these discussions that give birth to new ideas. Since the Age of Enlightenment, the luckier half of Europe is well aware that just like politicians have the power to thwart or hinder the birth of works that generate fundamental ideas of the new age, they are equally equipped to create favourable conditions for the birth of these ideas and make sure that they are conveyed to their principal addressees, i.e. members of the political community. Modern political communities may speak of a true change in the system of values if the change concerns not only intellectuals and the ruling political elite but also a critical majority of community members. In an ideal case, the political community of a given country freely comprises citizens of different nationality.<sup>13</sup>

Based on historical experience of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, we are compelled to make one rather obvious observation. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reaching a constitutional consensus rests with citizens who make up the state. This process must not be interfered by alien military force and cannot be thwarted by nationalists from neighbouring states. It is solely up to these citizens whether they reach it or not; at this point in history, they

cannot make any excuses or blame anybody else. Consequently, it is solely up to people who make up the Hungarian nation whether they strive to reconcile with their neighbours at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; along the same lines, it is up to the Slovaks whether they decide to establish national reconciliation with the Hungarians. Many players would like to intervene with this decision-making; however, in our period they cannot prevent information on their efforts from reaching both countries' citizens.

Both countries' leading political representatives would certainly view such a process with suspicion and would probably try to thwart it. In compliance with their own system of values, some of them would perceive it purely ideologically and would understand it as a propagandistic attack on their own authority just because they themselves maintain influence through propaganda that is a combination of aggressive ideologies. In other words, the project's failure would benefit or at least suit many. Nevertheless, much is to be achieved. For one, most ordinary people would like to support national reconciliation and they will if they are given an opportunity. For two, government is not the only channel to appeal to the population of a democratic European state; if there is a will, there are many other ways to convey a message to inhabitants of a neighbouring country.

Hungary's political community including politicians and various interest groups with different value systems may reach a consensus regarding this issue by, for instance, extracting the reconciliation issue from the category of domestic political issues and making it a nationwide objective. Quite frankly, any other strategy would hardly seem viable. It is difficult to imagine a neighbouring country reaching a constitutional consensus over its ethnic Hungarians if Hungary itself is unable to reach such a consensus. In no country do changes in the value system happen overnight. It is obvious that tangible results may only be achieved through relentless endeavour that spans a number of electoral terms. Hopefully, Hungary's political community along with its leaders may just agree to embark on the said task.

The constitutional consensus over the issue of ethnic Hungarians would not only benefit Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries as it would essentially affect also the national identity of Hungarians living in Hungary. An issue that may not significantly affect everyday existence of average Hungarian citizens but nevertheless forms an important part of their concept of the nation's future would simply be lifted from the frontline of domestic political battles and elevated among values and objectives that are subscribed to and often publicly presented by political parties as well as government leaders. This would amount to renaissance of the constitutional consensus regarding one of principal issues of the Hungarian nation's future.

Of course, one cannot rule out that the *status quo* will linger on and that Hungary along with ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries will remain unable to force these countries to guarantee conditions for their ethnic Hungarians' equal development and continue to do very little to change neighbouring nations' systems of values. In other words, the Hungarian Government will continue to provide the inevitable aid and cultural support, pursue diplomatic efforts to prevent most serious wrongs, strengthen cross-border ties and lobby for implementation and/or perfection of international human rights standards, knowing that even a combination of all these efforts is insufficient to preserve ethnic Hungarians' national identity in the long term.

On the other hand, Hungary and ethnic Hungarians could attempt to accomplish something completely new: in their respective countries, they could try to trigger the kind of public debate whose absence prevents the change in the system of values without which mutual relations between the Hungarians and their neighbours will never improve.

In order to achieve that, it is inevitable to reject especially the national culture of total moral relativism – which was dubbed Balkan or Eastern but has recently been emulated also in the Western world,<sup>14</sup> feeding back its traditional eastern source – that views application of all available means as nationally justifiable. Political leaders must abandon the conviction that the pivotal element of the national interest is expansion at the expense of others and that the overriding principle of the national interest, i.e. dominance, stands above all other values. As any other value that has been formulated as an antithesis to universal human values, this value includes an inherent conflict of various formulations and, of course, their formulators.

In this particular case, it is the mutual conflict between supreme values of the Romanians, the Slovaks, the Serbs, the Ukrainians, and of course the Hungarians. This conflict is further complicated by conflicts of differently formulated national values and their authors within particular national communities. Without universal moral principles and without a consensus based on their universal acceptance, force will remain the only method of settling disputes. It is force that will have to arbitrate conflicts between Hungary and its neighbours; not only that, the institution of force will also be applied to settle disputes between differently formulated national interests – or better yet – between interests proclaimed national in particular states by some parties without other parties' approval.

We have to ask ourselves some vital questions: What might be the share of majority nations in neighbouring countries that are prepared to embrace national reconciliation? What population groups or demographic categories

are prepared to embrace it? What are the chances of extending their ranks in the time of increasingly closer economic ties, cross-border cooperation, creation of trans-border regions and other bonds? Who are the principal opponents of national reconciliation? Will mutual competition between states not cause their ranks to increase?

The rate of liking or disliking of neighbouring nations is quite individual. Equally individual is the rate to which certain individuals encourage and expediently abuse aggressive national sentiments, let alone their methods. It is important to define this rate in both sub-communities because it largely determines the space for future activities of proponents as well as opponents of national reconciliation. Also, all these factors should be examined separately for each country because they obviously differ from one country to another.

The Hungarians should also be examined from identical viewpoints. They must answer a legitimate question: Is it truly possible to create an atmosphere of national reconciliation with neighbours who are suspicious as it is when symbols of Hungarian national revanchism regularly appear during rallies and scuffles on the streets of Budapest, at events organized by paramilitary organizations and even at football matches in neighbouring countries? It will certainly not be easy as public manifestation of revanchist symbolism plays into the hands of reconciliation's opponents who do not wish to eliminate national aggressiveness. The apparition of threat amplified by the media puts advocates of reconciliation into a difficult position.

Equally counterproductive is the equivocal rhetoric used by Hungarian and ethnic Hungarian politicians regarding stability of borders in the region. They believe they can get away with ambiguous statements on border stability during talks with western politicians if they interpret particular statements in a desirable way. They view equivocalness as an effective tool to mount pressure on neighbouring countries and win sympathies of domestic radicals at the same time. In fact, this equivocalness has grave consequences as it suits those political leaders in neighbouring countries that also play the card of national threat and are free to use the ambiguities to their own advantage by attaching them any meaning they please. Even worse, these politicians go even further and strive to attribute hidden meaning also to unambiguous statements by Hungarian officials. Last but not least, western political leaders learned a great deal about the politics of ambiguity and double communication in the Yugoslavian war; they are well aware that authors of ambiguous statements resort to interpreting their own words as the situation requires.

Still, a fruitful discussion with neighbouring states' citizens may not necessarily be doomed if only Hungary reached the mentioned constitu-

tional consensus. The moral sinew of a joint decision should be able to prevail over advocates of aggressiveness. On the other hand, the absence of the consensus will certainly thwart any chances of reconciliation. If any segment of Hungary's political community continues to exploit the issue of ethnic Hungarians in domestic power squabbles, use ambiguous rhetoric regarding the issue of border stability, revive hostile sentiments, and remain passive regarding the reconciliation issue while limiting itself to verbal skirmishes with leading political groupings, then chances of national reconciliation are very slim.

An even worse alternative is the situation in which one segment of Hungary's political community behaves in a described way, i.e. fuels tensions in neighbourly relations and plays the minority card in the struggle for power, while the other segment expends all its energy on neutralizing the damages caused. The result is a fragile equilibrium in which two antagonistic segments accuse each other of pointless and futile nationalism on the one hand and national insensitivity or even capitulation on the other.

The image individual nations form about themselves and other nations as well as basic principles of building a state are affected by many factors. In successor states to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the image of Hungarians has been certainly affected by Hungary's neighbourly and national policies with respect to its neighbours, activities of ethnic Hungarians living on their territories, actual as well as imaginary expectations, efforts and decisions of foreign subjects (especially superpowers) and of course these states' own actual and imaginary interests.

But the factor that affects Hungary's image the most is the concept of nation preferred by neighbouring states' political communities and their ruling political elites as well as their respective systems of political values. That is why the policy that advertises good neighbourly relations between the Hungarians on the one hand and Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs or Ukrainians on the other may in certain concrete cases help ethnic Hungarians coexisting with them. Unfortunately, it is not enough to change neighbouring countries' official doctrines with respect to the Hungarians; such a change requires a change in the system of values with respect to ethnic Hungarians living in these countries. So far, Hungary's political endeavour has been targeted primarily on the ruling political elite in these countries, which has not produced desirable results.

If we do not consider liberal democracy to be a chess board for the pleasure of power elites but rather a system created and maintained by the political community,<sup>15</sup> then a legitimate question is whether there is some new way of appealing to the political community despite the fact that a

majority of the political elite focuses on clogging already known ways. The answer to this question should probably be positive, for if such a way had not existed, the profound changes of our political culture that also took place against the will of the powerful would have been rendered impossible. The repressive means of the absolutism were unable to halt the Enlightenment, just like even more developed repressive means of the communist dictatorship were unable to prevent the change of the regime.

A number of western European states abandoned their national plans aimed at eliminating their ethnic minorities long ago and introduced multicultural autonomy models or consociation mechanisms. Such a change in priorities could be interpreted as a purely utilitarian decision since each change is brought about by concrete political interests; however, similar interests existed also in the past but did not affect the political elite's position until the national majority's system of values with respect to ethnic minorities changed.

In this particular case, the path seems to be even bumpier and often impassable because after 1989 the entire Central European region embraced purely utilitarian models of political decision-making that view any scrupulosity (not only with respect to nation) as unnecessary and inexpedient. An essential element of these models is populism that does not hesitate to use any assertions and arguments as long as they seem expedient from the viewpoint of gaining or preserving power. The deeply rooted national animosity in this region has a prominent place in politicians' communication methods and power calculations. In our time, the essence of anti-Hungarian sentiment is not a rational reaction to actual threat; instead, the sentiment itself has become an effective political tool that lives its own life even in the absence of actual threat.

In order to increase this tool's effectiveness, politicians seek to justify it in the eyes of the public by creating an illusion of threat that does not exist in reality. That is why it is necessary for the sake of national reconciliation to create consistent opposition to arguments in favour of eliminating ethnic Hungarians as well as to power interests related to political expediency of preserving the anti-Hungarian sentiment.

It seems to be an impossible task, mostly because the national state controls education system and is supported by an army of intellectuals who view elimination of ethnic Hungarians as a legitimate national goal. A significant share of these intellectuals was socialized as part of clerical intelligentsia during the communist regime, which is why ideology and propaganda is not strange to their system of values.

But there have been several crucial changes since 1918 when Czechoslovakia was founded. Most importantly, state borders became invi-

olable. It was crystal clear immediately after the change of regime in 1989 that state borders in Central Europe cannot be altered; besides, most states in the region have in the meantime become full-fledged members of the EU and NATO that guarantee their member states' borders.<sup>16</sup>

Another dissimilarity compared to the interwar period is that the newborn intelligentsia views the anti-Hungarian sentiment as a burden to democracy. Following the initial stage of the social change, political power was seized by politicians who strive to undermine or even eliminate liberal democracy. The anti-Hungarian ideology and the vision of a homogeneous state rid of ethnic Hungarians plays the pivotal role in justifying their social legitimacy. Consequently, the anti-Hungarian campaign has become a tool of curtailing freedom of the majority nation and manipulating its members, including those who associate their country's political future with liberal democracy and are prepared to act upon it.

Although the weight of this population group varies from one country to another, it can be traced in each country of the region. Their inhabitants' sensitivity to the Hungarian issue varies similarly. Naturally, it is the greatest in Slovakia and Romania, the two countries inhabited by the largest populations of ethnic Hungarians, the two countries that gained the largest territory after the split of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the two countries to which Hungarian assimilation policy of 19<sup>th</sup> century posed the greatest national threat and therefore continues to represent a painful part of their national history.

The situation of those who perceive the anti-Hungarian sentiment as a harmful historical legacy is complicated by two political attitudes: first, it is Hungarian and ethnic Hungarian political leaders' proclivity for using ambiguous terms and statements with respect to the issue of border stability; second, it is a specific kind of Hungarian populism that is interpreted by neighbouring countries as unpredictability and therefore a potential national threat.

Tackling the situation of ethnic Hungarians, as opposed to ignoring it, may become the means of reconciliation between the Hungarians and neighbouring nations. They are the key to establishing true peace between states as well as between nations,<sup>17</sup> something that cannot be achieved by international treaties and agreements between certain groups of political leaders. The reconciliation must strike roots in individuals' value systems. It is likely to be a long journey, which is why the sooner we make the first steps the better. Technological progress of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has provided us with the means of communication; all we need now is endurance and patience to establish and maintain a dialogue.



## NOTES

- 1 The present study was originally intended for the Hungarian public but the author sincerely hopes that it might be of use for other readers as well.
- 2 In 1985, representatives of the most important streams of Hungarian anti-communist movement met in Monor to harmonize their positions on relevant social issues. For further information, please see: *A monori tanácskozás 1985. június 14. – 16.* [Monor Negotiations of June 14–16, 1985] (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2005).
- 3 The clearest and most unambiguous position has been formulated by Miroslav Kusý who openly argued that the Slovak government ought to grant all minority rights to ethnic Hungarians. For further information, please see: Miroslav Kusý: *Čo s našimi Maďarmi?* [What about Our Hungarians?], (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1998).
- 4 An example of such a document was the *Joint Declaration of the Public against Violence and the Hungarian Independent Initiative*.
- 5 According to John Rawls, rights and freedoms must not be curtailed in the name of greater prosperity or for the sake of positions that may be filled thanks to curtailment. Also, Rawls points out that extending the rights and freedoms of some does not necessarily lead to curtailing the rights and freedoms of others; on the contrary, it may actually lead to extending their rights and freedoms as well. For further information, please see John Rawls: *Teorie spravodlivosti* [Theory of Justice] (Praha: Victoria Publishing, 1995, pp. 48–50 and 149–153).
- 6 In this context, nationalism is viewed either as a mobilization ideology (Elie Kedouri) or as a tool of the political elite (Karl W. Deutsch). It is undoubtedly a modern communication method (Benedict Anderson) as national states of those nations that have acquired independent statehood give their respective political elites – including intellectuals who view national culture as an ideological weapon – a dominant position in the field of nationalist propaganda through controlling most media as well as the essential share of cultural institutions and educational establishments.
- 7 In Slovakia, such an independent discussion took place with respect to parliament passing the resolution on unalterable nature of the Beneš decrees or the law on merits of Andrej Hlinka.
- 8 Such arguments could be traced in the rhetoric of political parties that formed governments with ethnic Hungarian parties in Slovakia as well as in Romania.
- 9 While choosing one's national identity is free, changing it is a process full of privation and tribulation. For further information, please see Miri Song: *Choosing Ethnic Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, pp. 40–41).
- 10 Between 1998 and 2006, parties representing ethnic Hungarians aimed to reduce disadvantages accumulated by previous administrations they were not part of while their partners cared primarily about accelerating the country's Euro-Atlantic integration and economic reforms and eliminating autocratic tendencies from politics.
- 11 Oppression of ethnic minorities does not stop at oppressing ethnic minorities. Eliminating national freedom of the oppressed also curbs national freedom of the oppressors, even though it puts them into a dominant position. This thesis was formulated by applying John Locke's famous thesis on protection of freedom in general to the area of protecting individuals' national freedom. According to Locke, individuals are entitled to resist the government power that threatens their freedom as long as the outcome of their resistance does not go beyond restoring the rule of law and does not become the source of new oppression.
- 12 Thwarting such a discussion from the position of power may lead to dictatorship of either a narrow elite or the majority.

- 13 Jennifer Jackson Preece considers the principle of equality between minorities and the political community to be the most pressing problem of the minority issue. The main problem according to her is that the majority simply does not view ethnic minorities' members as equal citizens and does not acknowledge their specifics. For further information, please see Jennifer Jackson Preece: *Minority Rights – Between Diversity and Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, pp. 9–13).
- 14 We hereby refer particularly to understanding of the new world order by the neo-conservative Bush administration that did not hesitate to wage wars of aggression.
- 15 For further information, please see Giovanni Sartori: *Teória demokracie* [Theory of Democracy], (Bratislava: Archa, 1993, pp. 158–174).
- 16 Hungary was among first countries to recognize independent Slovakia in 1993.
- 17 According to David Miller, it is possible to achieve coexistence and even harmony of different national and other group identities. In order to accomplish that, introduction of special rights and institutions is necessary. For further information, please see David Miller: *On Nationality*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 153).



Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet  
Fórum inštitút pre výskum menšín  
Forum Minority Research Institute  
Parková 4.  
931 01 Šamorín  
WEB: [www.foruminst.sk](http://www.foruminst.sk)  
E-mail: [foruminst@foruminst.sk](mailto:foruminst@foruminst.sk)

Kálmán Petőcz ed.  
National Populism and Slovak – Hungarian Relations  
in Slovakia 2006 – 2009

First edition  
Responsible editor of the series: Károly Tóth  
Translation: Daniel Borský  
Typeset: Kalligram Typography, s. r. o., Nové Zámky  
Print: Expresprint, s. r. o., Partizánske  
Published by: Forum Minority Research Institute, Šamorín – Somorja,  
2009

ISBN 978-80-89249-37-4