

The Ethnopolitics of the HZDS-SNS-ZRS Coalition Government in Slovakia from 1994 to 1998

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Abstract:

This article discusses the ethnopolitics of Vladimír Mečiar's government in Slovakia in the period of years between 1994-1998, with a particular focus on the Hungarian minority. The introduction outlines ethnic heterogeneity in Slovakia, giving a brief historical background for some minorities. The next part covers the result of the 1994 parliamentary election, which led to the formation of the HZDS-SNS-ZRS coalition government headed by Vladimír Mečiar as Prime Minister. The study also includes the ideological profiles of the governmental parties, which are linked by strong accentuation of nationalism and statism. The article seeks to analyse the ethnopolitics of the government in the above-mentioned election term, evaluate its positive and negative aspects. In particular, the affairs, new legislation adopted and its impact on the largest Hungarian minority living in Slovakia.

Keywords:

Vladimír Mečiar, Slovakia, ethnopolitics, bilingual school report affair

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Introduction

The territory of today's Slovakia has a "rich multicultural and multi-ethnic past" (Bumová 2013: 8). New problems and threats began to appear after the change of the political regime; it was as if the states travelled back in time to their pre-communist history to face the same problems they had dealt with in the past, such as nationalism, re-development of statehood, social and economic tensions, etc. Jacques Rupnik uses William Faulkner's words in connection with post-communism in Central Europe: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Ekiert 2003: 1).

Post-communist society is commonly described as weak, divided, and atomised (Staniszki 2006: 179). In the post-communist times, the former Soviet Bloc countries returned to their former "specific historical trajectories, which had

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been interrupted by the Communist rule” (Schopflin 2003: 2). This, however, also included negative aspects associated with ethnic conflicts (Schopflin 2003: 5) or the reintroduction of issues which were left open after WWII before the Communist Party took over. Václav Havel (2009) aptly summarised this aspect of post-communism in the following quote from his speech at George Washington University in 1993:

Nations are now remembering their ancient achievements and their ancient suffering, their ancient suppressors and their allies, their ancient statehood and their former borders, their traditional animosities and affinities—in short, they are suddenly recalling a history that, until recently, had been carefully concealed or misrepresented.

The variance in the transformation paths of post-totalitarian countries after the collapse of the bipolar world may be explained by the different post-communist states revisiting different historical continuities (Schopflin 2003: 4). In order to understand the governmental policy of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar between 1994 and 1998, we need to take into consideration the ethnic problems and conflicts that the territory of today’s Slovakia faced in the first half of the 20th century.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the ethnopolitics of the HZDS-SNS-ZRS coalition government in the period of years between 1994–1998. What were its pros and cons? Was there any discrimination against any of the minorities in this area? This study seeks to confirm the hypothesis that political entities which appeal to national populism represent an important mobilising component often pursue discriminatory policies against minorities during their administration. This hypothesis relies on Jack Snyder’s thesis that the “elite persuasion strategies are a central mechanism in promoting nationalism” (Dufek 2002). The author has used several research methods to prepare this paper: literature research, synthesis and content analysis of legal documents, expert publications and articles on the ethnopolitics of the coalition government in Slovakia between 1994 to 1998 as well as on post-communism and ethnic conflicts in the territory of Slovakia in its modern history.

In order to understand the policy of the coalition government in 1994–1998, we need to consider the historical context tied at least to the 20th century or even to the more distant past of what Slovakia is today.

Characteristics of minorities in Slovakia - a historical retrospect

Slovakia is among the most ethnically heterogeneous countries in Central Europe. According to the 1991 census, 10.6% of Slovak citizens identified as being of Hungarian nationality, 1.6% were Roma, 1.1% Czech, 0.6% were Ruthenians and Ukrainians (Ivantyšyn 1999: 15). This means that 14% of the Slovak population were of a nationality other than Slovak (Szomolányi 1997: 17). Ethnic heterogeneity is based regionally. While 99% of the population are of Slovak nationality in the northern district of Dolný Kubín, the district of Dunajská Streda in the south is dominated by the Hungarian nationality, with the Slovak nationality accounting only for 11% (Krivý 1996: 161). Also represented in Slovakia, in addition to the above-mentioned national minorities, are other, less numerous minorities: Moravian (6037), Silesian (405), Polish (2659), German (5414) (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic)², and Jewish, which was claimed by about 2000 citizens in 1991, constituting both an ethnic and a religious minority (Bumová 2013: 8) in Slovakia, albeit it used to be much larger in the past.

According to Jelínek (2009: 19), Jews probably began to settle in the territory of today's Slovakia even before the Slavs, i.e. in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. According to other sources, it was as late as the 11th century, with the first qahal established in Bratislava in the 13th century. There was major development of Jewish communities in the 17th and 18th centuries in connection with migration from Moravia and Austria into northern Hungary. The Patent of Toleration helped improve the social and economic position of Jews in the late 18th century. After the Vienna arbitration, a part of southern Slovakia, with a Jewish community of 45 000, was annexed by Hungary (Slovak Government Office). In the interwar period, the share of the Jewish population in the territory of today's Slovakia reached about 3.6%, i.e. a population of about 89,000 (Kamenec 2011: 97), mostly members of the middle and upper classes – businessmen, craftsmen, doctors, lawyers, etc.

The totalitarian Slovak State of 1939 decided to address the “Jewish question” through the so-called “Jewish Code”. Individuals that identified as Jews were gradually deprived of their economic, political and social rights and eventually their civil and human rights as well, as they were transported to the extermination concentration camps (Kamenec 2011: 97) to be killed in gas chambers or otherwise massacred and systematically murdered, tortured, or forced to hard physical labour. 80% of the Slovak Jews were murdered between 1942 and 1945. A

2 As citizens could claim any nationality of their own choice in the 1991 census, these data may not correspond to the actual ethnic make-up of the Slovak population.

half of the survivors emigrated in the following years (Gyárfášová 2008: 179). After 1989, about 2000 Slovak citizens declared to be members of the Jewish minority.

The Roma equivalent of the Jewish holocaust took place during the same period in Slovakia. The Roma have lived in what is today Slovakia for nearly eight centuries. The first targeted efforts for their assimilation date back to the 18th century and were made by the Habsburg monarchy. The Roma's life in a non-agrarian diaspora was the alleged reason for their failure to blend in with the majority population. The Roma made a living as labourers, blacksmiths, handymen, horse, cattle and poultry dealers, servants, musicians, or door-to-door salesmen. During World War I, the first attempt to prevent Roma from pursuing a nomadic lifestyle was made by Hungary (Antalová & Vrzgulová 2004). Further efforts took place during World War II.

The first forced labour camps, including those for the Roma, were created in Slovakia in 1941. In their life outside these camps, the Roma faced discrimination, xenophobia, ghettoisation, and territorial confinement, preventing them from making an honest living and deepening their unemployment (Antalová 2013). The "Roma question" was addressed, and they were deported to concentration camps at a slower pace because, unlike the Jews, they did not have the movable and immovable assets that the government (Antalová & Vrzgulová 2004) or members of the majority population could seize ("aryanise"). While the number of victims of the Roma holocaust remains unknown, it is estimated to have reached 500 thousand in Europe and about a thousand in the Slovak territory (Garek 2020).

A Slovak peculiarity of the time was the existence of enclaves of Carpathian Germans who had settled in the territory of today's Slovakia between the 12th and 19th centuries. They had created three larger settlements where a German dialect was spoken: Bratislava and the surrounding area, the Hauerland (Kremnica, Handlová, Nitrianske Pravno), and the Spiš region; a minor share was living scattered all over Slovakia (in Zvolen, Košice, and Bardejov). Their significant contributions included the development of crafts, of mining towns mainly in the Spiš region, urbanisation in central and western Slovakia (Bratislava and Trnava) (Ďurkiovská 2007), and hammer mills in eastern Slovakia (Medzev, Gelnica, Štós, etc.). During WWII, a part of them sympathised with and actively supported the policy of Nazi Germany. On the contrary, another part of the Carpathian Germans became actively involved in the anti-Nazi resistance movement, deriving their identity from the region they were living in or from their own history or dialect ("Mantakisch") rather than from Nazi Germany.

Nevertheless, most of them (around 100 thousand) had left the Slovak territory by the end of WWII for fear of the Soviet army. About 20 to 40 thousand

members of the German minority were expelled from Slovakia as a result of the Beneš decrees. However, some of them disagreed with the forced relocation, hiding in the nearby forests or neighbouring villages to avoid expulsion (Krafčíková 2015)³. The number of citizens who declared to be of German nationality was 5626 and 5405 in 1991 and in 2001, respectively (Hulínek 2003). Despite its continued extinction or assimilation, this ethnic group has preserved its distinctive original language (mediaeval German dialects) and the rich culture its members had brought along from their original homeland.

After the expulsion of the Carpathian Germans, Hungarians became the largest national minority in Slovakia. Their settlements are first mentioned in the 9th and 10th centuries in the southeast and southwest of the country otherwise inhabited by Slavs. Hungarian immigration continued in the 11th and then in the 15th-16th centuries. In the 19th century, the Hungarian political elite promoted what was referred to as “Hungarianisation” – the assimilation of the non-Hungarian minorities in Hungary (Maxwell & Turner 2020: 10), which also included the territory of modern-day Slovakia.

After the breakup of Austria-Hungary, nearly 3 million ethnic Hungarians (Dufek 2002) suddenly found themselves living in other countries without changing their residence. Upon the establishment of Czechoslovakia, the Hungarians (a population of 400-500 thousand) living in Slovakia (Dufek 2002) became a national minority, and Hungary had lost two-thirds of its original territory – a fact that Hungarians still have not come to terms with and one which, to some extent, continues to affect Hungary’s relations with neighbouring states to this day.

According to the Vienna Arbitration of 1938, the southern part of Slovakia was annexed by Hungary, but the territory was returned to Czechoslovakia in 1945 (along with the Hungarian national minority). In light of the experience of the unilateral expulsion of Germans from the post-war Czechoslovakia, the powers did not accept attempts at the unilateral expulsion of the Hungarians. On 27 February 1946, Czechoslovakia and Hungary signed a population exchange agreement (Šutaj 2005), under which 90,000 Hungarians were relocated to Hungary, and about 70,000 ethnic Slovaks moved from Hungary to Czechoslovakia (Kopa 2008). This exchange was accompanied by disillusionment, broken up families, and increased animosity on both sides due to different social conditions. However, a part of the Hungarian minority was forcibly moved into the Czech border regions. The Beneš decrees and the

3 About 100 of the total number of 750 inhabitants of the Chmelnica were relocated.

post-war population exchange between Slovakia and Hungary continue to pose sensitive points in Slovak-Hungarian relations (Kopa 2008).

The author has focused on the four above-mentioned national minorities (Jewish, Roma, German, and Hungarian) because of their history of systematic persecution in Slovakia. Other national minorities: Czech, Moravian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Ruthenian did not experience genocide or expulsion in Slovakia. The border regions of Slovakia traditionally show a higher share of members of national minorities. Unlike the largest national minority of Hungarians, the Polish minority is not represented in Slovakia significantly. The ethnic line (between Slovak and Hungarian ethnicity) is an important dividing line in Slovakia, manifesting itself in the basic electoral orientation of political parties as well as in the formation of coalitions (Krivý 1996: 151).

Having laid out the historical background of the minorities in Slovakia, the author would like to continue by focusing on the policy of the coalition government after the 1994 parliamentary elections, which slowed down the democratisation process in Slovakia. This period can be described as a milestone marking the departure from the Central European type of transition of the V4 (Szomolányi 1999: 57-58) and a move towards the East European type of transition, characterised, among other factors, by the “structuring of the political parties” (Szomolányi 1999: 61). The election term of 1994–1998 was characterised by national populism of the ruling parties, i.e. the HZDS, the SNS, and the ZRS.

1994 parliamentary elections in Slovakia

The early parliamentary elections in Slovakia took place on 30 September and 1 October 1994, i.e. 27 months following the parliamentary elections of 1992 and six months following the fall of Mečiar’s second government in March 1994. A total of seven political formations qualified for Parliament. Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia; HZDS) won the highest voter support, receiving 34.96% of the votes and winning 61 seats in Parliament. Following in second place was Spoločná voľba (Common Choice⁴) with 10.41% of the votes and 18 seats (Kopeček 2007: 190). The HZDS won more than three times the number of votes and seats of the second-best political formation – the election union called “Spoločná voľba”. The lead of HZDS over the other political parties

4 In May 1994, the SDL agreed to form an election coalition named Spoločná voľba (Common Choice) with three small left-wing and centre-left parties: SDSS (Sociálno demokratická strana Slovenska – Social Democratic Party of Slovakia), SZS (Strana zelených na Slovensku – Slovak Green Party), and HPS (Hnutie poľnohospodárov na Slovensku – Slovak Agricultural Movement; Kopeček 2007: 190).

that reached Parliament was huge. This means that the parliamentary elections resulted in a significant electoral advantage of the HZDS over the other parties in Parliament.

The third most successful candidate – Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement; KDH) won 10.18% of the votes and 17 seats. Maďarská koalícia (Hungarian Coalition; MK) won the same number of seats with 10.08% of the votes. Demokratická únia (Democratic Union; DÚ) won 8.57% and 15 seats. Združenie robotníkov Slovenska (Slovak Workers' Association; ZRS) won 7.34% and 13 seats. Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party; SNS) won 5.40% and 9 parliamentary seats (see Tab. 1).

Table 1: Election results for the Slovak National Council in 1994

Political party	votes (%)	Seats
<i>HZDS-RSS*</i>	34.96	61
Spoločná voľba	10.41	18
KDH	10.18	17
MK	10.08	17
DÚ	8.57	15
ZRS	7.34	13
SNS	5.40	9
Others	13.06	-
Total	100	150

* Italic type used in the table indicates the coalition parties.

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

The HZDS won the highest share of the valid votes in the government coalition, i.e. nearly 35%. Headed by Vladimír Mečiar, the HZDS was successful in regions with a higher share of Slovak nationality, in smaller municipalities and among older voters (Krivý 1996: 142). Vladimír Krivý states that the HZDS identifies itself as a “wide-centre movement” while, in reality, the HZDS represents a leader-oriented political movement (Krivý 1996: 153) which relies on mobilising a significant part of the public, yet the actual political activity of the HZDS shows that its representatives understand democracy as a majority-based, utilitarian system with authoritarian features (Krivý 1996: 154).

From the very beginning of his political career, Vladimír Mečiar established himself as a strong leader and solo player. Opening the “national issue”, along with the establishment of the independent state, resulted in the “polarisation

of the political elites, which certainly did not contribute to the creation of consensual policy” (Szomolányi 1999: 53) in Slovakia. Out of the entire political spectrum in Slovakia after the Velvet Revolution, only the representatives of the SNS and, later, the HZDS promoted the split of Czechoslovakia. For that reason, the political elites were divided into two camps: that of the “evil ones opposing Slovakia” and the “good ones, the founding fathers”. Such rhetoric was used by the HZDS and the SNS. Jacques Rupnik notes that, for Slovaks, the formation of the national state also meant access to “Europeanism” without Hungarian or Czech intermediaries. What the Slovaks sought to achieve in Europe was to become visible and achieve recognition. It was against the backdrop of this ambivalence that Mečiar made his skilful European play (Rupnik 2018: 304).

Krivý describes Mečiar’s style of rule as “confrontational and unco-operative”. In his public speeches, Mečiar did not shy away from using lies and vengeance on those who would dare defy him, vulgar mobilisation of supporters, trampling on the Constitution, common disrespect of the democratic institutions he did not control (“the Constitutional Court is yet another diseased element”), mass personnel changes in public administration at the central and regional levels after the 1994 parliamentary elections, taking control over electronic media, unrestricted use of the parliamentary “tyranny of the majority”, unilaterally occupying positions in the control bodies, gaining influence and control over the Slovak Intelligence Service, and engaging in a power struggle against the Slovak president (Rupnik 2018: 153-154).

In the 1990s, the HZDS was referred to as a centrist movement; during this period, it can be described as ideologically obscure. According to other sources, HZDS is characterised as a “centre-left political entity, combining nationalism, scepticism to economic reforms, and populism” (East 2016: 114). Initially, no one was able to convincingly place the HZDS on the left-right scale; later it was commonly referred to as a non-left political movement with significantly left-wing voters close to those of the Slovak Communist Party (Gyárfášová 2013: 263).

Certain right-wing traits appear in the political practice of the HZDS, such as strong national accents bordering on nationalism and statism, which, in turn, guaranteed its cooperation with the SNS. The HZDS first formed a coalition government with the extreme-right SNS from November 1993 to March 1994 and then also together with the extreme-left ZRS in 1994 - 1998. After Czechoslovakia’s return to democracy, the SNS resumed its activities in 1990, following up on its own historical traditions dating back to 1871.

In the first free elections held in 1990 after the Velvet Revolution, it was the only political party to demand Slovak independence (Liďák 2001: 62). The SNS

was a right-wing party characterised by authoritarian features, Euroscepticism, and protection of the interests of the state-building Slovak nation. Its election programme included the approval of legislation on the Slovak language as the state and official language of Slovakia, without exception. The inaugural assembly of the SNS took place in Žilina on 19 May 1990. Vítazoslav Mórica became chairman, followed by Jozef Prokeš from March 1991, Ľudovít Černák from 1992 (Žatkuliak 2005: 1391), and Ján Slota from February 1994.

After Slovakia gained independence in 1993, the SNS started addressing the demands of the Hungarian national minority in Slovakia. The extreme nationalism of the SNS representatives was reflected in their statements made with regard to members of the national and racial minorities, and in the positive evaluation and justification of the Slovak State of 1939–1945 (Liďák 2001: 76). The SNS chairman Ján Slota claims that his defamatory comments regarding the Hungarian minority were presented by the media as incomplete and “taken out of context”, and that the SNS “is by no means an extremist party” (‘O 5 minút 12’). Ján Slota rejects the placement of the SNS on the left-right political spectrum and proposes to divide the parties into two groups: the political parties that help the Slovak nation and those that seek to harm it. The rhetoric of the party continued to follow this spirit throughout the 1990s.

While the SNS rejected any racist, nationalist or chauvinist ideologies in its election programme (Urubek 1999: 87), its actual political practices showed quite the opposite. In the election period of 1994–1998, the SNS contributed to the spreading of anti-Romani sentiments, the so-called “antiziganism” – the belief that the Roma do not deserve special social support because the situation they find themselves in results from their free choice and poor morals, whether as individuals or collectively (Hojsík 2010: 232). The SNS slogan used on large billboards in the election campaign before the 1998 elections only serves as proof: “Vote for Slovakia without parasites”. When asked by the *Sme Daily* whom he meant by that, the SNS chairman answered: “Quite a lot of Gypsies, but also whites”. He considered the representatives of the Hungarian parties in Slovakia to be “first-class parasites” (*Denník Sme* 1996).

In domestic policy, the party sought to enforce “alternative education”, which, in practice, would mean the introduction of bilingual teaching in schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction. The SNS promoted the adoption of the state language act, which would not include the use of the languages used by ethnic minorities. Despite the government’s commitment, this act had not been passed before the 1998 elections. In the election period in question, the SNS also advocated the reintroduction of the death penalty (Urubek 1999: 84-85). In terms

of foreign policy, the SNS disagreed with Slovakia's accession to the EU and the NATO, criticised the foreign policy of the USA, and, at the international level, cooperated with extremist and nationalist political parties such as Jean-Marie Le Pen's the National Front (Urubek 1999: 85). 49% of the SNS voters said that the main reason for their vote was that the party protected Slovak interests. The other attributes that they associated with the party consisted of the ability to resolve important issues, the ability to defend the voters' interests, and the need for a change (Urubek 1999: 85).

Združenie robotníkov Slovenska (Slovak Workers' Association; ZRS), established by the former SDL Member of Parliament Ján Lupták following criticism of the SDL, of which he was originally a member and a parliamentary representative, was another populist party. The ZRS was first established in April 1992 as a civic association, to be transformed into a political party with a membership of 13 thousand in spring 1994 (Kopeček 2007: 223-224). The ZRS was established by a faction of the SDL due to their dissatisfaction with how the left-wing working class voters were represented by the post-communists (Rybář 2005: 135). What Lupták considered voter "betrayal" by the SDL included, for example, joining Moravčík's government together with right-wing parties (Kopeček 2005: 463) or the fact that in 1990 and 1991 the SDL had abandoned its communist identity and took a social democratic course. A paradoxical situation also occurred as the SDL was mostly formed by members of the intelligentsia rather than by workers and lower-class members, whose goals the party was to protect. Ján Lupták, originally a bricklayer foreman by profession, was one of the rare exceptions (Kopeček 2007: 222) and he often referred to his worker past in his public speeches, saying that he still "held a shovel and a trowel in his hands" (Kopeček 2007: 223).

The ZRS election programme of 1994 was dominated by criticism of the economic, social, and political issues in the society after the fall of the communist regime, yet at the same time the programme used the rhetoric of the overthrown regime (*Volebný program ZRS*)⁵, on the one hand, to identify the above-mentioned problems of that time associated with the transition to democracy and, on the other hand, to smirch the ruling elite, in particular, its non-transparent management and privatisation of state assets. The Slovak Workers' Association owes its success in the 1994 parliamentary elections to the fact that it took over the voters of the Democratic Left Party (Strana demokratickej ľavice) and thus of the Communist Party of Slovakia.

5 The ZRS election programme includes terms such as "economic base", "protection and security of the state", "housing construction development", "5-year planning interval", a striking reminiscence of the Marxist and communist discourse. (*Volebný program. ZRS*).

At the time of its establishment in 1994, the ZRS was able to speak to the protest voter. Seemingly negligible before the 1994 elections, the coalition potential of the ZRS proved surprisingly high after the elections (Kopeček 2007: 234-235), with the 13 ZRS Members of Parliament able to “tip the scales” (Kopeček 2007: 226) as part of the coalition with the HZDS and the SNS. According to the 1994 election results, the ZRS achieved greater support in regions with higher unemployment and lower entrepreneurship rates (Krivý 1996: 138) with a higher share of non-religious people (Krivý 1996: 143).

Slovak government policy with regard to national minorities between 1994 and 1998

In his book entitled *Gorilla*, reporter Tom Nicholson used a hyperbole to describe the HZDS leader Vladimír Mečiar as a “chronic liar and choleric” (Nicholson 2012: 41), his coalition partner Ján Slota as an “uncontrollable nationalist”, and the ZRS chairman Jan Lupták as a “merry peasant”, who together “set the (political culture) bar ridiculously low” (Nicholson 2012: 41). The HZDS-SNS-ZRS coalition government was characterised by authoritarian governance, ideological statism, strong clientelism, and anti-Hungarian Slovak nationalism (Gyárfášová 2013: 266).

Apparent in the programmes of the two smaller coalition partners of the HZDS was rejection of the post-1989 development (by the ZRS) and nationalist refusal of the Western European liberal democracy model (by the SNS) (Kopeček 1999: 59). The three seemingly disparate political entities (with the SNS espoused to right-wing ideas, the ZRS placed on the far left, and the HZDS being a catch-all party) stood united in the economic field, with all three parties supporting a socially oriented free-market economy and disagreeing with the privatisation of strategic enterprises and sales of land to foreign entities (Urubek 1999: 88).

The cultural and value profiles of the HZDS-SNS-ZRS voters were characterised by leanings towards paternal statism and authoritarianism (Gyárfášová 2013: 291) and greater leniency towards the abuse of power, corruption and clientelism, as opposed to the supporters of the then-opposition (Gyárfášová 2013: 296). The voters for the government parties represented the rural component of Slovak society (Kopeček 1999: 51).

In regard to national minorities, the coalition government adopted a confrontational approach, in particular, in terms of the Slovak-Hungarian relations. The ruling parties’ Roma policy also included a mobilisation component. In the areas of culture, education and language, the ruling political parties mainly focused

on protecting the Slovak language and its preference over the national minority languages (Smetanková 2013: 66-67). From the very beginning of their joint rule, Mečiar and Slota “cultivated a feeling of the majority of Slovaks being threatened by other ethnic cultures or religions” (Bumová 2013: 12) and posed as protectors of Slovak statehood, culture, or language against “Hungarian oppression”, seeking to complete the “thousand-year struggle of the Slovak nation for independence” (Dufek 2002). The governmental parties considered the concept of multiculturalism a “threat to the identity of the Slovak nation” (Bumová 2013: 12). They did not see the culture of the existing minorities in Slovakia as an asset to be protected to enrich the mainstream society (Bumová 2013: 12).

On the other hand, the attitudes of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia reflect the ethnopolitics of Hungary, which seeks to protect the interests of ethnic Hungarians living in the territory of other states. In the period of 1990-1994, the Hungarian democratic forum led by József Antall pursued an uncompromising ethnopolitics which was “in Slovakia (quite intentionally, without doubt) and elsewhere, interpreted and presented as a manifestation of irredentist efforts and a danger to the unity of the state” (Dufek 2002). Along with the disillusionment among a large part of the population following the breakup of Czechoslovakia, this “ethnopolitical” capital became an instrument of legitimising the new regime (Dufek 2002).

The policy of the HZDS-SNS-ZRS coalition government in the election term after 1994 focused on developing the language and culture of the state-building Slovak nation. In addition, it also elevated its confidence and rights even in ethnically mixed territories where they formed the minority and curtailed the rights of the national minorities living in Slovakia. The Preamble to the Constitution of the Slovak Republic contains the constitutional codification of Slovaks: “We, the Slovak nation...” suggests an inferior position of the national minorities in Slovakia (Petőcz 2010: 229) and refers to the Slovak nation as the state-building force that grants certain rights to the existing minorities in Slovakia (Petőcz 2010: 229-230). Slovakia is the only country in Central Europe to be defined ethnically (Vašečka 2010: 242).

In the period in question, no diversity, including ethnic diversity, was seen as natural and desirable in Slovakia (Vašečka 2010: 241). The Council of Europe’s slogan “equality in diversity”, where equality does not mean uniformity (Petőcz 2010: 222), is not reflected in the Slovak Constitution preamble. According to Vašečka, there were two types of political elites in Slovakia during this period. He called the first type the “mythologised primordial Slovaks” and the other the “pluralistic modern Slovaks” (Vašečka 2010: 242), but, as he says, both types saw

Slovaks as the dominant ethnic group and Slovakia as the country of Slovaks, which, they believe, is how it should always be. Any isolated cases of politicians defending the rights of minorities in Slovakia were accused of being anti-Slovak, smeared as traitors of the Slovak nation, etc. Anti-Hungarian and anti-Roma sentiments formed an important element of the governing parties in 1994-1998.

The rhetoric of the political elites of the coalition government of that time (in particular, of Vladimír Mečiar and Ján Slota) often invoked the age-old antagonism between Slovaks and Hungarians and used invectives in their speeches mainly against the Hungarian and Roma minorities, pointing out the historical context mentioned in the introduction to this paper. The SNS chairman Ján Slota aspired to rehabilitate the Slovak State of 1939–1945 in the eyes of the public (Křen 2019: 124) despite that state being responsible for the Jewish and Roma holocaust and being referred to as a “clerical fascist regime” (Kubátová, Kubát 2020: 12–13). Prime Minister Premiér Mečiar tolerated this attitude by Slota and did nothing to intervene, much to the disapproval by the liberal elites in Slovakia (Křen 2019: 124). However, Mečiar was thus winning the nationally oriented voters and sympathisers of the HZDS. Nevertheless, historian Jan Křen (2019: 124) sees it as a positive that one of the public holidays was the Slovak National Uprising Day to commemorate the 1944 uprising.

Křen continues his assessment of Mečiar by saying that his originally accommodating step towards the Hungarian minority – the act on the protection of the language rights of minorities, passed by Parliament in 1993 to enable the bilingual names of municipalities and registries – “was devalued by Mečiar’s demagogical attacks made once against the Hungarians, another time against the Roma, and then against anyone Mečiar considered his enemy” (Křen 2019: 124).

According to Jack Snyder, the nationalist rhetoric is usually used in the early stages of democratisation (Dufek 2002) as an instrument for mobilising the masses; with regard to Czechs, this included economic factors rather than national ones. According to Pavel Dufek, nationalism peaked after the adoption of the State Language Act by the National Council of the Slovak Republic in 1995 (Dufek 2002). This act significantly restricted the use of Hungarian as an official language. This was demonstrated, for example, in the “bilingual school certificates affair”.

In this affair, bilingual certificates were no longer issued by schools where a minority language was the language of instruction, which was met with displeasure by both the parents and politicians, in particular, among the Hungarian national minority, as well as by the representatives of Hungary. The affair stemmed from the adoption of the new language act of 1995, which limited the use of minority languages in official communication. The use of these languages was to

be governed by a separate act, but no such act was adopted during the 1994-1998 election term (Smetanková 2013: 63-64).

The voters and supports of the then-coalition parties HZDS and SNS were those most willing to discuss political issues publicly (Bútorová 1998). According to the table below, citizens considered the political climate in Slovakia to be worse than before 1994, with greater fears of expressing their political views, which especially applied to the undecided voters and members of the Hungarian national minority. The dissatisfaction of the Hungarian as well as the Roma national minorities was the result of facing a long-term policy of discrimination by the governing parties (Bunce 2011: 61). The Slovak Constitution and other international treaties adopted, for example, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Kusý 1999: 178), were to guarantee the protection of the rights and the all-round development of minorities.

Table 2: “Remember the situation in Slovakia before the parliamentary elections of 1994 and answer how, in your opinion, it has changed” (%)

	It has got better	No change	It has got worse	Don't know
Security	1	12	85	2
Justice in the society	2	22	70	6
Position of and opportunities for young people	10	20	66	4
International position of Slovakia	7	20	60	13
State of democracy	7	26	54	13
Opportunities for citizens regardless of political affiliations	5	29	51	16
Compliance with the Constitution and the law	4	27	50	19
Quality of adopted legislation	4	24	42	30
Your and your family's standard of living	14	43	41	2
Position of the Hungarian minority	22	39	18	21
Position of the Roma in the society	31	38	13	18

Source: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti 1997 (1997 Summary Report on the State of the Society), IVO 1997, p. 199.

However, the culture of the national minorities was underfunded, and cultural subsidies for the Hungarian national minority shrank (Smetanková 2013: 65). The other laws which disadvantaged the Hungarian national minority during the 1994–1998 election term included, for example, the reform of the territorial and self-governing structure of the Slovak Republic, and the “alternative

teaching” attempt, which would lead to the assimilation (Kopeček 1999: 51) of the Hungarians in Slovakia. Some subjects in Hungarian schools were to be taught only in the Slovak language.

Even the EU criticised both the authoritarian tendencies of Vladimír Mečiar’s government and the governmental policy with regard the Hungarian minority. The political elites representing the Hungarian national minority in Slovakia were looking for an “ally among the anti-Mečiar Slovak parties“ (Kopeček 1999: 51), but the question of territorial autonomy for the Hungarians was the key issue over which any cooperation attempts had failed. Negotiations between a part of the opposition and the representatives of the Hungarian parties took place from January to December 1997. The cooperation between the SDK and the MK, signed on 2 December 1997, was only achieved after the consensus was reached among the representatives of the Hungarian parties that such territorial autonomy was not their objective (Kopeček 1999: 52).

Unification of the Hungarian minority parties

In May 1998, i.e. 160 days before the parliamentary elections, the amendment to the Election Act was adopted⁶ and published in the Collection of Laws under no. 187/1998. This Act was passed on 20 May 1998 in a form that was nearly identical to the original draft (Krištofik 2001). According to Section 9, the electoral regions were removed and the whole of Slovakia represented a single electoral district, which favoured the larger political parties with a charismatic or strong leader. The aim of the Election Act was to disadvantage the opposition political parties in the parliamentary elections and prevent them from winning the majority in the electoral districts. The electoral threshold for Slovak Parliament was traditionally 5%; the change with regard to the previous period was that if a coalition of multiple parties ran in the elections, they would have to win at least 5% of the votes each.

This amendment to the Election Act went against the logic of forming coalitions, which was the reason for the unification of five opposition parties into the new political party, the SDK (Slovenská demokratická koalícia – Slovak Democratic Coalition)⁷, which appeared in the elections as a separate political

6 Another election act also amended was Act No. 233/1998 on municipal elections. Given the focus of the paper, however, the author only discusses the amendment to Act No. 187/1998 on parliamentary elections.

7 The SDK consisted of 5 political entities: Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement; KDH), Demokratická únia (Democratic Union; DÚ), Demokratická strana (Democratic Party; DS), Sociálnodemokratická strana Slovenska (Social Democratic

party⁸ with 150 member-candidates on the ballot. Had it remained a coalition of separate parties, the SDK would have needed to win 25% votes to enter Parliament. While the five original political parties did not cease to exist, they did not run in the parliamentary elections then⁹.

The same situation took place among the political parties of the Hungarian national minority. The MKDH, Spolužitie (Co-existence), and the MOS formed the united Strana maďarskej koalície (Hungarian Coalition Party; SMK) and, unlike the three original parties (the MKDH, Spolužitie, and the MOS), transformed into a single political party which continued to exist for two more election terms (Kopeček 2007: 464). Paradoxically, the new election law, which was aimed at keeping the HZDS in power and preventing the anti-Mečiar parties from winning the majority of the votes and thus of the parliamentary seats, helped unite the opposition forces and stabilise the system of political parties in Slovakia before the elections. The SDK and the SMK were formed by parties that were quite diverse in terms of values and ideologies due to the hybrid Slovak environment (Kopeček 1999: 62).

The SMK represented an alliance of rather heterogeneous political entities representing the interests of Hungarians in Slovakia. It was referred to as a right-centre (or centre-right) people's Christian democratic and conservative party. It resumed the more moderate ideas of the MKDH and of the MOS rather than the more radical views of Spolužitie (Kopeček 2007: 477). With regard to the identity of the SMK, it is essential to formulate its relationship with Hungary. This political party preferred cross-border cooperation including the additional benefits delivered by Slovakia's accession to the EU, and the best possible Slovak-Hungarian

Party of Slovakia; SDSS), and Strana zelených na Slovensku (Slovak Green Party; SZS). The impetus behind the closer cooperation among these opposition parties was the failed 1997 referendum on direct presidential elections and on joining the NATO. The formation of the SDK was preceded by the so-called Blue Coalition (in October 1996), consisting of the KDH, DÚ, and DS. In December 1996, these three political groups signed the "Christmas Call", demanding respect for the rule of law, ending political violence, and cooperation of all forces in Slovakia: "Let us form a broad entente of democrats." This Call resulted from the unconstitutional removal of MP Gauliedera from office. (*Denník SME: Modrá koalícia vyzvala demokraticky orientované strany na spojenie do širokej dohody demokratov*).

- 8 The so-called Blue Coalition (formed on 29 October 1996 united the KDH, DS, and DÚ). Later, from 14 June 1997, joined by the SDSS and the SZS, it presented itself as the SDK (KDH, DS and DÚ, SDSS and SZS) as these political parties decided to enter the parliamentary elections as an electoral alliance. Following the amendment to the Election Act, which prevented this, the SDK was registered as a separate political party with 150 members on 10 March 1998 (Kopeček 2007: 331 and 337).
- 9 After the 1998 parliamentary elections, the members constituting the SDK fell apart but some of them formed a new political party, the SDKÚ (Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – Slovak Democratic and Christian Union).

relations, which the SMK considered of vital importance for the Hungarians living in the territory of Slovakia (Kopeček 2007: 477).

According to Lubomír Kopeček (2007: 477), the 1998 election programme reflected the diverse preferences of SMK's predecessors with regard to the Hungarian partisan partners. The more radical *Spolužitie* (Co-existence) had been previously oriented on the nationalist and conservative FIDESZ while, on the contrary, the MOS had worked with the liberal-centrist Union of Free Democrats. In regard to the programming and ideological orientation of the SMK before the 1998 parliamentary elections, the programme document was rather extensive yet quite general. An exception was represented by the sections on local and regional self-government, which included the definition of the competences of the self-government bodies, the right to cross-border and international cooperation, the right to engage in separate international acts with an emphasis on reinforcing the independence of territorial self-governing units, the decentralisation of the state, and the subsidiarity principle (Kopeček 2007: 475).

A dispute over the nature of the regime

The Slovak Constitution created a strong prime minister and a very weak president. The concentration of executive powers in the hands of the prime minister was huge and, once he also had the parliamentary majority at his disposal, he also possessed legislative power (Fish 2001: 77). Vladimír Mečiar enjoyed the advantages of the Slovak Constitution and went on to degrade democracy in Slovakia "with a stream of arbitrary actions" in 1994-1998 (Fish 2001: 77). Among other things, he attempted to silence the free press, pushed through laws to curtail the rights of the Hungarian national minority, and attacked his political opponents (Fish 2001: 77).

As the parliamentary elections approached, Slovak citizens showed increasing apathy in pre-election polls, expressing their long-term dissatisfaction with the domestic political situation in Slovakia as well as the country's course of foreign policy (Bútorová 1999: 67)¹⁰ and the non-transparent and clientelistic privatisation (Bútorová 1999: 66)¹¹. The failed referendum of 1997 can be considered a

10 According to an IVO survey from April 1998, when asked "Where is Slovakia actually headed?", 43% of the population answered they did not know, 24% said it was into the EU, 25% replied that it was towards an alliance with Russia, and 8% said it was towards neutrality (Bútorová 1999: 67).

11 There was a prevailing sentiment among the population that the privatisation would not have a positive effect on the standard of living of all the citizens but rather only on a small group of the privatisers (Bútorová 1999: 66).

major event in the perception of the authoritarian tendencies of Vladimír Mečiar's government. The IVO survey from July 1997 showed that if the referendum had taken place in the form announced by President Michal Kováč, "it would have been valid and would have given a positive answer to the two key questions asked" (Bútorová 1999: 69).

According to Zora Bútorová, one of the important moments in the pre-election development of public opinion was the fact that extreme dissatisfaction and disillusionment of the citizens by the situation in the country may not cause only helplessness but may instead lead to intensified efforts to make a change (Bútorová 1999: 66) and to cooperation among the opposition political parties, which also included the parties representing the interests of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. A clear dividing line between Mečiarism and anti-Mečiarism appeared and was strongly manifested both in the partisan system and in the entire political regime in Slovakia in 1994-1998, causing significant polarisation.

A dispute over the nature of the regime took place during the election term in question, and the regime was described as "democratic, bordering on authoritarian" (Kopeček 2007: 109), which led to the slowdown of the clear ideological definition of the relevant political parties in the in the left-right sense. This dispute manifested itself in the attempts by other political entities to define themselves against the HZDS, the most dominant party. The development of the system of political parties in Slovakia was therefore markedly influenced by the "Mečiarism vs anti-Mečiarism" dividing line, which was linked with other dividing lines at the electorate level: "the urban/rural and educational lines and the national-ethnic line" (Kopeček 2003: 216). This dominant line between Mečiarism and anti-Mečiarism, sometimes also referred to as the "dispute over the nature of the regime" (Kopeček 2003: 216) or the "struggle for the regime" (Szomolányi 1997: 14), also affected the formation of the coalition in 1994 and, in particular, after the 1998 parliamentary elections. Parties from opposite ends of the political spectrum cooperated with each other during these periods.

Results of the 1998 parliamentary elections

The parliamentary elections held in Slovakia on 25 and 26 September 1998 are described as "breakthrough" because they changed the orientation of the country's foreign policy fundamentally. The results of the 1998 elections led to a radical political change in Slovakia. The HZDS, the previous strongest party in the government and one that enjoyed the highest voter support in the period between 1994-1998, may have won the 1998 elections, but the other political parties that entered Parliament had no interest in forming a coalition with that party.

Despite winning the parliamentary elections with 27% and the highest number of seats (43) in the Slovak National Council, the HZDS became an opposition party, along with their former coalition partner the SNS, which won 9% of the votes and 14 parliamentary seats in 1998. The ZRS, the third coalition partner in the election term of 1994-1998, failed to qualify for Parliament in the above-mentioned elections, winning only 1.30%, far below the electoral threshold. For this reason, the coalition and opposition political parties switched places completely and the new coalition government produced by the 1998 elections was formed by the former opposition parties from the 1994–1998 election term.

A pro-democratic and pro-reform coalition of four political parties with different ideologies and policies resulted from the parliamentary elections of 1998: The SDK (Slovak Democratic Coalition, with 26.33% and 42 seats), the SDE (Democratic Left Party, with 14.66% and 23 seats), the SMK (Hungarian Coalition Party, with 9.12% and 15 seats), the SOP (Party for Civic Understanding, with 8% of the votes and 13 parliamentary seats).

Table 3: Results of the 1998 parliamentary elections

Political party	votes (%)	seats	seats (%)
HZDS	27.00	43	28.66
<i>SDK*</i>	26.33	42	28
<i>SDE</i>	14.66	23	15.33
<i>SMK</i>	9.12	15	10
SNS	9.07	14	9.33
<i>SOP</i>	8.01	13	8.67
Others	5.81	-	-
Total	100	150	100

* Italic type used in this table indicates the coalition parties.

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

The main priorities of the new coalition included consolidating democracy, implementing important socio-economic reform, and Slovakia's accession to the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance, which was seen as a counterbalance to Vladimír Mečiar's isolationist policy. The coalition government was formed by parties on both the left and the right wing of the spectrum, a testament to the existence of the Mečiarism vs anti-Mečiarism dividing line capable of uniting ideologically heterogeneous political parties and preventing the conventional left-right division of the political scene.

Conclusions

The elections for the National Council of the Slovak Republic in 1998 are described as a milestone of the electoral “defeat of Mečiarism” or the “end of Slovakia’s international isolation” (Mesežnikov 1999: 38), which the country had entered during the rule of the HZDS headed by its chairman Vladimír Mečiar. An irreplaceable part in the election campaign before the 1998 elections was played by a strong civil society in Slovakia, which managed to bring all its activities aimed at a stronger election turnout and at educating citizens about the principles of the rule of law under the umbrella of the Civic Campaign ‘98 (Občianska kampaň ‘98)¹². However, it was important for the fall of Mečiarism in Slovakia that there was a synergy among multiple components: an active civil society, the activities of the opposition political parties and their subsequent coalition talks, free and functioning independent media amidst the atmosphere, and the determination of the citizens to make a change in the society through the parliamentary elections, which resulted in the high turnout of 84% of voters. All of these components, which were so instrumental in the fall of Mečiarism in Slovakia, saw active involvement of national minorities because the HZDS-SNS-ZRS government of 1994–1998 had focused on protecting the Slovak language and the national interests of the majority population in Slovakia.

According to Karen Henderson (2013: 145), the extreme sensitivity of a part of the Slovak population to the perceived threat of the nearly 11% Hungarian minority mobilised nationalist sentiments in Slovakia. Fear of the Hungarians was embedded in the Slovak psyche much deeper than any aversion to Czech and Russian domination. The inferiority complex demonstrated itself as aggressive nationalism, which was much stronger in central and northwest Slovakia where there were no Hungarian-speaking citizens (Henderson 2013: 145-146).

The adoption of the language laws thus turned into a “patriotic and heroic feat” according to Pytlas (2013: 181). In Hungary, on the other hand, the laws of the Slovak government of that time drove political efforts for the unification of all ethnic Hungarians living outside the territory of present day Hungary in what was Hungarian territory before the Treaty of Trianon. This conflict was deepened by the Hungarian party Jobbik, which denied Slovak statehood (Pytlas 2013: 181–182), which was usually followed by aggressive reactions from the SNS.

12 Two leaflets distributed as part of the Civic Campaign OK ‘98) were translated into Hungarian: an election motivation leaflet and the voter’s manual, because 11% of the Slovak population profess to be of Hungarian nationality (Rock volieb ‘98 Campaign).

This study thus confirms the hypothesis that political parties which appeal to nationalist populism as an important mobilising component pursue discriminatory policies against national minorities in their rule. The ethnopolicies of the HZDS-SNS-ZRS coalition government proved permanently discriminatory towards the Hungarian national minority, whose demands were considered by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar as attempts to disrupt Slovakia's territorial integrity.

As the Hungarian national minority is the largest in Slovak society, its involvement in the “anti-Mečiar resistance” was most apparent. This can also include the coalition talks after the 1998 elections, which Strana maďarskej koalície (Hungarian Coalition Party, SMK) took part in. The positive aspects of the discriminatory policy of the ruling HZDS-SNS-ZRS coalition can be found in the fact that despite the environment, so unfavourable for the development of the minority ethnic groups in Slovakia, the fragmented political parties of the Hungarian national minority were able to unite to form a single political party (the SMK) and win 9% of the votes and 10 parliamentary seats in the 1998 elections and become the first part representing the interests of a minority in the modern history of Slovakia after 1989 to be a part of the coalition government.

According to Kopeček (2007:479), the systemic position of the SMK was considerably different from that of its predecessors. The confrontational line between Mečiarism and anti-Mečiarism caused the coalition (governmental) potential of the party to increase significantly and the nationalist conflict line in Slovakia to decrease during that period.

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