IDENTITIES – MINORITIES – FOREIGN POLICY

Collective Actions and Political Attitudes: 30 Years of Slovak Experience

Editors:
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Zuzana Mészárosová-Lampl
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Introduction

Dear reader,

The monograph that we present to you maps some aspects of the post-November development of Slovak society, which in the thirty years of existence of the independent Slovak Republic has undergone a significant transformation in political, economic, legal, cultural and spiritual terms. This change or, scientifically speaking, the transformation of society after the political changes in 1989 led to the fact that a relatively egalitarian society began to change into a hierarchical one, based on an obvious, obvious system of relations of superiority and subordination, where financial capital plays a significant role, but it was even more significantly strengthened the importance, influence and role of a well-organized network of social relationships, specifically relationships at the level of family, friendships, a wider circle of acquaintances, and where at the same time there has been a decline in culture and civility, morals and ethics. Individuals were thus divided into certain specific groups, while belonging to a certain specific group subsequently becomes decisive for the individual's integration into society. This affiliation has become a decisive or determining factor for his role and position in society.

It can therefore be concluded that after 1989, Slovak society was first divided into two basic groups – winners and losers in the economic, political and cultural transformation. Gradually, in a very rapid sequence, internal divisions followed within these two groups into further subgroups according to such distinguishing features as belonging to a certain ethnicity and identity dominantly into Slovaks and Hungarians, place of origin into those from the city and those from the countryside, according to ideology into liberals and conservatives, or most recently according to attitudes to international security issues, specifically to the mass influx of illegal migrants, to the issue of international terrorism, to what is happening in Ukraine, according to support or opposition to mandatory vaccination against the disease Covid19[1], or to membership in the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) on the basis of their approach to the above-mentioned problems, or according to the answer to the question of whether or not Slovakia is still a legal and democratic state. Especially the last period – between 2015 and 2023 – brought division and deep polarization of Slovak society based on fundamentally ideological issues. This so far irreconcilable polarization has produced a dehumanized division of individuals into groups labelled with various, often even vulgar labels and designations such as sun-lovers[2] and

[1] COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) is an infectious disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2, previously temporarily as 2019-nCoV).

[2] Orig. slniečkari; a Slovak neologism that began to be used in the context of the European refugee crisis, especially for people with a welcoming multiculturalist approach to Islamic culture and immigration; above all, it is used pejoratively from the opposite party

anti-sun-lovers, fascists and anti-fascists, decent people and rude people, cockroaches, desolates, monkeys and baboons, vaxers and anti-vaxers, pro-Americanists and anti-Americanists[3], pro-Russian trolls, peacemakers, "wise men" or confused and misinformed and the like, who need to be punished for their "wrong" and "mistaken" opinion not only by exclusion from the public space, from the society of so-called decent people and the mainstream, through the so-called cancel culture[4], but also by economic liquidation

[3] Intense polarization on this issue was caused by the conclusion of the Defence Cooperation Agreement with the USA, which was approved by the National Assembly of the Slovak Republic in 2022 and signed by the President. Up to 54% of Slovaks do not agree with the adoption of this agreement, only 32% of respondents support it. Up to 57% of respondents want a referendum on this agreement, 34% have the opposite opinion. The presence of American soldiers hinders up to 64% of Slovaks interviewed. On the contrary, their presence does not bother only 29% of respondents, 13% do not mind American soldiers at all, and 16% rather do not bother. Certainly (15%) or rather (21%) 36 percent of respondents want military cooperation with the USA, 52% have the opposite opinion. Source: Median.sk. https://www.median.sk/pdf/OSTATNE/4522507_Sprava_medzinarodne_institucie_v19.pdf

[4] The cancel culture penetrates to Eastern Europe from the Anglo-American space and is closely related to the so-called political correctness. It can be characterized as single-track, the only correct way of thinking, which forces us to deny history, and therefore to rewrite it in terms of today's categories. It can be characterized as an ideological colonization that leaves no room for freedom of expression and that invasively penetrates many areas, including public institutions. The cancel culture can under the pretext of so-called "diversity" actually results in the abolition of the sense of any identity. In practice, it manifests itself by removing statues of historical figures, ostracizing and mocking critics of the current Western, neoliberal system, up to erasing them from public databases in the sense: if he/she cannot be found in the databases, including the internet, he/she does not exist.

through loss of employment for an opinion, while various activists also assist very effectively through coercive actions in the form of petitions. At the time of the preparation of this publication, there was even talk of punishing an opinion at the level of criminal law by prison, which is already in direct contradiction with the reference of November 89. At the same time, there has been a loss of trust in central institutions, state bodies and public authorities, as well as in international organizations[5], while at the same time traditional institutions of society such as the family are questioned in the public discourse of society, which directly threatens democracy, since trust in institutions in general is among its main pillars[6].

These splits and polarization are accompanied by a process of inventing the enemy which stems from feelings of

[5] According to the Median agency, 40% of Slovak citizens trust international institutions in the order of the V4, the EU, the UN and NATO (they trust all the mentioned institutions), approximately a quarter trust exclusively the V4 (27%), another quarter do not trust any institution (25%) and approximately 8% declares confidence in all examined institutions with the exception of V4. The Slovaks who were interviewed showed the highest level of trust in V4, when up to 58% of the respondents expressed trust. 49% of respondents trust the EU and the UN, but only 43% expressed distrust in the EU, which is a significant decrease since 2004, when the EU enjoyed the highest level of trust in Slovakia (around 70%). Slovaks show the lowest level of trust (41%) and the highest level of mistrust (48%) towards NATO. Source: Median.sk. https://www.median.sk/pdf/OSTATNE/4522507_Sprava_medzinarodne_institucie_v19.pdf

[6] For example, in connection with the crisis caused by the disease Covid-19, in the period from April 2020 to July 2021, trust in the Slovak government decreased from 47% to 11%, in the president from 54% to 21%, in scientific institutions from 65% to 31% and towards healthcare from 73% to 33%. Only 22% of Slovak citizens trusted EU institutions in November 2022. Source: https://www.akosamateslovesko.sk/tema/dovera-v-inštitucie/

threat to existing hierarchical relations, values, existing identity and the integrity of society, as we have seen in the case of the global pandemic of COVID-19 or nowadays in the culture war between traditionalists and progressives, since *"having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one. Look at the generous flexibility with which skinheads of Verona would, just to identify themselves as a group, choose anyone not belonging to their group as their enemy. And so we are concerned here not so much with the almost natural phenomenon of identifying an enemy who is threatening us, but with the process of creating and demonizing the enemy"* (Eco, 2013:10).

In Slovakia, this situation is the result of the post-communist transformation, which took place during the thirty years of the independent republic's existence on the political level, from an authoritarian regime to a neoliberal democracy, and today results in the so-called media-oligarchic pseudo-democracy[7], as well as on the economic level from the model

[7] Under the term media-oligarchic pseudo-democracy, we understand the setting of a political system in which, although formally preserved elements of the democratic mechanism remain, the ruling establishment and elites (the media and a certain segment of the art scene – the so-called celebrities: actors and singers. influencers) democratically suppress plurality, freedom of opinion and they introduce censorship, they promote the only "correct" opinion and their own "correct" ideology, the minority opinion at the expense of the majority, while they are financed from the background by the oligarchic layer of society represented by big businessmen, the owners of multinational technological and financial companies, whose members in some countries directly enter the political life or foreign embassies – British and American. Some political scientists

of a centrally planned economy to an open extreme neoliberal, capitalist economy. At the level of political institutions, i.e. at the level of the government, Slovakia was forced to form its institutes and institutions from the beginning as an independent nation state. This is closely related to the definition of national interests as well as the formation of future foreign policy orientation and foreign policy itself, not only in terms of values, but also in terms of practical, institutional building and financial security of the Slovak Foreign Service. This is closely linked to ensuring the security and defence of the newly formed state[8], which culminated through membership in the EU and NATO, as one of

call such systems defective or illiberal democracies to cover the real state of play what is in fact the creeping introduction of autocracy covered with slogans like human rights, the rule of law and democracy. In Slovakia, the media has acquired the status of the fourth power in the state, within which they decide what the public will learn and what not, what is true and what is false, what will be discussed and what not. They decide who will govern and what policies will be implemented without such decision being subject to democratic process and democratic control. The media do not seek the truth, they own it.

8 Ensuring security and defence is one of the basic tasks of every state, on which it spends part of its human, material, financial and other resources. Fundamental changes in the security environment after the fall of bipolarity and the end of the Cold War, as well as new security threats and risks, together with the transformation of their nature and forms, inevitably required (and continue to require) that states, respectively alliances (coalitions, unions), within the framework of improvement their security and defence systems, adopted a number of political, security, military-strategic, organizational, economic, legislative and other measures in order to guarantee the security and defence of their interests, freedom, independence, integrity, territorial integrity, etc. (IVANČÍK – KELEMEN, 2010. (Defence of the state: Economy, planning and financing of defence. Liptovský Mikuláš: Academy of the Armed Forces of General M.R. Štefánik))

Slovakia's newly defined basic nation-state interests, which after 2004 led to a reassessment of the perception of the nation-state itself and its sovereignty in the context of a changed foreign policy situation, as well as to the reassessment of its national interests, and at the same time it also influenced Slovakia's foreign policy directions. Ultimately, this process led not only to institutional changes, but also to changes in political and strategic culture, as both formal and informal rules governing political actors began to change and adapt under the influence of Europeanization, transatlanticization, and interoperability.

The support of specific political solutions by society, both in terms of the changed or established foreign policy orientation of Slovakia, as well as in terms of specific public policies, subsequently also led to the emergence of new political and social conflict lines, and thus to the birth of new identities. Closely related to this are other phenomena that can also be explained through the theory of creating an enemy, respectively through the so-called the demonization of the enemy that we have encountered since the beginning of human existence. Differentiating "we" from "them", exactly in the spirit of Eco quoted above, self-evaluates ourselves in comparison with others. In such a comparison, we overestimate and positivize our qualities, values, way of life, and while at the same time negating, underestimating and demonizing others, strangers, that is, those who do not belong to our community. The stranger is always the embodiment of otherness; he/she is always attributed negative qualities. He/she is always the ugly, disgusting and smelly, uncivilized, uneducated, poor, from a lower social class (preferably a

criminal and a prostitute). (Eco, 2013: 11-27) We do not realize that *"from the very beginning, in the role of the enemy, not so much others who threaten us directly" are created, but rather those "whom someone presents to us as a threat in the name of their interests, even if they don't threaten us directly"*. (Eco, 2013: 12) We do not perceive them as different because they threaten us, but because of their otherness we begin to perceive them as a threat. If we clearly name and at the same time list all their negative qualities best in comparison with our "good ones", while we can also purposefully lie, we thus support the perception of "us – them", and thus ultimately prepare public opinion for a possible future conflict. (Brhlíková, 2018)

This process of creating and demonizing the enemy is based on the assumption that each side has a *"positive and benevolent image of itself, but harbours a negative and hateful image of the enemy."* (Krejčí, 1997: 385) This is the so-called a mirror image in the perception of "us – them", in which we confirm ourselves, remain resistant to changes in the behaviour of the other party. We refuse to accept information that contradicts our perception of the world and, on the contrary, we look for information that confirms and strengthens our image. We reinterpret them and refuse to accept that the adversary may share the same values and vision of the world as we do. We close our minds to any questioning of our world view. Facts are subject to selection and reinterpretation (Holsti, 1967; Jervis, 1976).

Such a mirror image incites the darkest human passions and emotions such as fear and hatred, which become a strong motive for the fight against the thus created internal but also external enemy, as explicitly described in his literary work

"1984" by George Orwell. The language used, together with the media, serves to permanently disarm and disable the adversary, thereby losing the possibility of gaining the image of a martyr and thus also the sympathy of the public and possible followers in the form of avengers, which would almost certainly happen in the case of his physical liquidation.

In political science and in the theory of international relations, the given issue is elaborated by the cognitive approach. This one questions traditional basic ideas about the rationality of actors in politics. It is based on the simple premise that the statesman, responding to stimuli from the external environment, acts according to how he himself perceives this environment, based on his experiences, knowledge, family history and intellect. He then objectively defends not only the values of the company, he primarily defends the values that he himself professes, he actively reacts, selects information and influences the environment and acts as he thinks that problems should be solved[9]. An important role is played here by his perception and thinking, his origin, where he grew up and studied, his way of thinking and perceiving what he has in common with others and how to present and subsequently reflect these shared ideas in political institutions, political decision-making and diplomacy (Burchill, 2005). His/her perception, worldview, ideology, his/her prejudices and stereotypes are then projected and

[9] Among the representatives of this approach, O. Holsti (Cognitive dynamics and the image of the enemy: Dulles and Russia, 1967), R. White (No one wanted war: erroneous perception in Vietnam and other wars, 1968), R. Jervis (Perception and erroneous perception in international politics, 1976 and J. Steinbruner (Cybernetic decision-making theory, 1974).

reflected in the decisions and official documents he makes. Usually, however, these are not the work of just one person, but the entire bureaucratic apparatus of the state, which leaves in them the signs and influence of stereotypes, ideologies, worldviews, value scales and the perception of the outside world of all involved (Brhlíková, 2019).

Within Slovak society, this is also reflected in the perception of specific policies implemented by a specific political representation, or in the perception of our position within the EU and NATO integration structures. It turned out that, despite Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO, when it was assumed that – in the process of integration and consolidation of democracy, the rooting of which in society as the only possible alternative and platform for solving social conflicts and political disputes, Slovakia's integration into the EU had a significant to help – Slovak society will adopt a collective identity and the feeling of otherness and alienation will disappear, relations based on hierarchical principles and principles of creating the enemy persist in society, which ultimately strongly polarizes society, escalates internal political conflicts and brutalizes and dehumanizes political language, leading to authoritarian tendencies and suppression of basic democratic rules. These tendencies are not only present in Slovak society, but also appear across the whole of Europe, respectively within the EU. Across Europe, we are witnessing the growth of support for populist to anti-democratic and progressive forces, whose common feature is the binary division of society into "us" (we) and "them" (them), which applies not only to members of foreign (non-domestic) communities, but also on members of the "own"

community, as long as they do not support the solutions offered by us and do not share the same opinion with us.

On the other hand, differences in the issue of "us and others" may not necessarily be a necessary source of conflicts. As Eriksen (2007: 143) states, "*It is so often repeated that cultural identity is a source of conflict in today's world that this statement has acquired the status of banality in its dullness. However, it is not the cultural identity itself that is the alleged triggering mechanism of the conflict, it is mainly the attempts to expropriate, ignore, suppress and exterminate this identity."* It requires respect, while "*respect means that a person's voice is heard, that he is viewed as an equal and that he is understood as a person with the right to define himself... The transition from contempt to respect requires meeting others and the ability to perceive them as different, but still equal"*. (Eriksen, 2007: 187)

It is not always necessary for the mechanism of enemy creation to work and lead to polarization and division of society into irreconcilable camps. We also point to this in this monograph, when in its first part we focus on the analysis and clarification of the processes of creating collective identities in the environment of ethnic minorities, specifically Hungarian, and in the second part we devote ourselves to the formation of national interests and Slovak foreign policy during the thirty years of existence of the independent Slovak Republic. Our goal is to describe and clarify the internal and external dynamics of the creation, formulation and anchoring of the investigated phenomena in the reality of Slovak society. Through basic scientific methods of description, analysis, induction, deduction, comparison and interpretation, as well as sociological methods, we describe and explain the issue of

creating collective identities, as well as the way and forms of creating and developing nation-state interests and competent foreign policy, and outline possible starting points and solutions to the issues raised by us.

The monograph is opened by László Öllös, who in his chapter deals with the creation of the enemy, or separate subcultures or groups between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority. In his reflections, he ponders on the forms of reconciliation between the small nations of Central Europe. According to him, reconciliation is a basic prerequisite for establishing the democratisation of society. He specifically addresses the phenomenon of Hungarian-Slovak reconciliation, which, according to him, is one of the most important issues for the future of Central Europe. In his opinion, whether the reconciliation took place or not has and will have a significant impact on building the political communities of both countries. At the same time, it can become an example – in one way or another – for neighbouring countries, as well as for the "experiment" called the European Union. It is the example of the Hungarian-Slovak reconciliation that can help solve or, on the contrary, prevent the solution of one of the fundamental problems of the EU: the conflict between the nation-state and the effectiveness of continental decision-making.

In her chapter, Zuzana Mészárosová-Lampl deals with the issue of the decline of members of the Hungarian national minority in Slovakia. The Slovak Republic has always been a "colourful" country from the point of view of nationalities. Based on the statistical data of the 2021 Population and Housing Census (2021 PHC), members of 28 nationalities live

in Slovakia, of which 13 are autochthonous. The largest minority nationality is the Hungarians. According to those registered their share in the population of Slovakia ranges from 7.7 to 8.4%[10]. The author first briefly outlines how the number and proportion of members of Hungarian nationality developed over the past 50 years. In the next part, she deals with the factors that influenced and continue to influence the development of the number, i.e., the decline of Hungarians. In particular, she attributes to them the non-recognition of nationality, hidden migration, natural decline, and assimilation. The decline of Hungarians is most closely related to assimilation, that is, the gradual change of the Hungarian national identity and its replacement by the Slovak national identity.

The monograph concludes with a chapter by Radoslava Brhlíková, focused on the search for the face of Slovakia's foreign policy in the period of its creation after 1990, first as part of the emancipation of Slovak regions within the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, as Milan Kňažko mentions in his memoirs, and since 1993 strictly as part of the function and policy of an independent sovereign state operating in international relations. It is in the environment of building and shaping foreign policy that not only hierarchical relationships and specific forms of dominance and subordination are formed, but perhaps most prominently, identity is constituted, accompanied by the process of creating an enemy. In this section, the author deals with the construction and

[10] The first figure includes persons whose first nationality is Hungarian, the second figure refers to all together who declared Hungarian nationality as their first or second nationality.

development of Slovak foreign policy during the 30 years of the existence of the Slovak Republic. She maps and analyses the formation and reshaping of its goals, interests, and outputs from the short period of a separate, independent actor, through the politics of a responsible member fulfilling obligations, up to the lackey and vassal politics of today.

We wish you a pleasant reading!

Authors



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