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THE ORIGINS OF SOCIETAL POLARIZATION AND ELITE FRAGMENTATION IN SLOVAKIA AT THE SECOND PART OF 20-th CENTURY

One of the ironies of democratic transitions is that under the wrong conditions, democratic institutions enable anti-democratic forces to rise to power through legitimate electoral means. Since 1991, Slovak society has twice returned Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar to power. Many independent observers claim that Meciar frequently subordinates democratic norms and procedures in order to maintain his political position while his consistent waging of power politics expands the elite disunity. Yet his support in society has remained significant. This section examines the origins of this "Meciar Phenomenon." It first looks at the Soviet-Czechoslovak, centrally planned transformation of Slovak society and assesses its effects on the Slovak electorate. The socialist-era transformation of Slovakia was externally imposed and done in a way that reinforced traditional behavioral attitudes rather than modernity. This, we add, has produced a society with large segments that are prone to populism and paternalism providing fertile soil for the mobilization strategies of national-populist politicians, like Meciar, to take root.

Second, this section looks at the formative experiences of contemporary Slovak elites. We find that Slovak success in achieving some national goals during Prague Spring led to less elite alienation in the period after. Purges following the Prague Spring were neither as extensive nor punitive as in the Czech Lands. At the same time, Slovak elites retained a more positive attitude towards the constructive possibilities of political life to fulfill national and personal professional goals. The result was greater popular acceptance of the post 1968 regime, a weaker civic dissident movement, greater tolerance of the participation of former communists in the post November 1989-regime, and a muted anticommunist drive. This, in turn allowed Meciar to draw much of his support base from former communist elites.

Finally, this section looks at the immediate causes of contemporary elite disunity in the problem of Slovak statehood. It reviews acrimonious debate on the issue between "autonomists" and "Czechoslovaks" since the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), and demonstrates how the final victory of autonomists in 1992 is used as a political weapon to informally attempt exclude Czechoslovaks and ethnic Hungarians from having an impact in the future direction of the state.

The Origins of Contemporary Slovak Society: Slovak development over the past century has been shaped by its location at the periphery of Central Europe: first within the framework of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire (prior to 1918), then within the First Czechoslovak Republic and finally within the Soviet Bloc (1948-1989) closely connected to the timing and pace of industrialization. Hence external economic and political actors have shaped the modernization of Slovakia. Liberal civic principles, for example, were first imposed on Slovakia at the behest of reform elements in Budapest. Czech reformers later attempted something similar. In both cases, Slovaks largely refused liberal principles on the ground of the nationality of their advocates who were perceived as "alien" or foreign. Indeed, Hungarian revolutionary liberals lacked any understanding of the national and cultural emancipation demands of the Slovaks and, at times, later Czech administrators were perhaps equally insensitive. While the Soviets obviously dispensed with liberalism, they brought "socialist industrialization" to Slovakia, imposing it, in the early-mid 1950s, over the literally dead or imprisoned bodies of much of Slovakia's national-communist elite.

In addition to being alien in origin, Slovakia's transformation has been rapid. While the Czech lands of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia were ranked among the world's 15 richest regions globally in GNP per capita,?] Slovakia remained, in 1938, "little more than an agrarian appendage of the Czech lands, supplying it with raw materials." In 1930, for example, 59.8 percent of Slovaks, compared to 26.9 percent of Czechs made their living in agrarian pursuits. Worse, Slovak peasants remained less productive: On average, a four-hectare farm in the Czech lands out-produced a Slovak farm of over ten hectares [1].

Socialist policies of equalization preferentially developed the Slovak economy after 1948.[2] By 1990, standards of living as indicated by a number of objective indicators—from numbers of televisions per household to numbers of graduates with higher levels of education-reflected growing economic equality between the two regions. In 1985, industrial production as a share of total economic activity was approaching the proportionate levels of the Czech Lands, leading the federal government to proclaim that equalization had been reached in most areas. Industrial workers had comprised 43.8 percent of the work force in Slovakia compared to the Czech lands' 47.2 percent. Agricultural laborers made up a mere 12.2 percent of the work force—down from the 1948 figure of 60.6 percent. By contrast, the drop in the Czech lands was from 33.1 percent to 9.4 percent [l].

The speed and abruptness of industrialization has rendered Slovak society highly prone to paternalism and populism:

Populism: Socialist industrialization was the process of modernization in technological terms only. Unlike in the Czech lands where traditional society was gradually transformed in conjunction with gradual capital accumulation, the Soviet type of modernization was imposed on society [4]. Rapid, externally imposed technological modernization left society reeling in response. The effect of imposed industrialization and partial urbanization was not the breakdown of traditional elements of society but the reinforcement of

them. As a result, despite rapid industrialization and modernization under socialism, Slovakia remains heavily influenced by the countryside, its traditions, and its mentality. Thus, although Slovakia is now industrialized, a corresponding shift in behavioral patterns towards "modernity" has occurred less rapidly [5]. The Slovak electorate retains a significant component of "traditionalism" that is mostly concentrated in the elderly, rural dwellers and the less educated [6]. The uneven development of a relatively industrialized and urbanized country on the one hand, and reinforced premodem political culture on the other, provides a favorable environment for charismatic and populist politicians. This partly explains why the ruling elite of the independent Slovak Republic was composed of the nationalist-populist politicians. Nor is it surprising that the current ruling coalition focused around Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar finds its greatest and most steadfast support in Slovakia's "socially conservative rural setting," while support for opposition parties comes more frequently from metropolitan areas[6].

Paternalism: Despite the many bottlenecks and inefficiencies of Czechoslovak central planning, for the majority of Slovaks, communist policies of equalization produced a generation whose only economic experience was of broad, if restrained, upward mobility. The 1970s brought the peak of efforts to equalize levels of development across the two republics. For Slovak managers and bureaucrats, this meant unprecedented growth and opportunities. Many of today's industrial leaders in Slovakia got their first jobs and promotions during this period[5]. For older Slovaks as well, most of whom had grown up on poor, under-productive farms under comparatively primitive conditions, as well as for recent graduates, this was also period of unparalleled upward mobility. Not surprisingly perhaps, the period of "normalization" from 1968 to 1989, was perceived by a majority of Slovaks interviewed in at least one 1990 poll as "the most successful and happiest periods in their nation's history"[5].

Slovakia's intensive period of industrialization and urbanization familiarized Slovaks with a strong state role in the economy. This may be reflected in the present day in the form of greater levels of support for state intervention in the administration of the economy than is found in the Czech Lands[9]. According to polls taken in 1990— before the pain of transition took the form of unprecedented unemployment—state paternalism remained an important concept in Slovak attitudes: a much greater proportion of Slovaks (47 percent) preferred continued state employment guarantees (compared to 32 percent in the Czech lands). 34 percent of Slovaks (vs nine percent of Czechs) agreed that unemployment should be avoided even if it would hinder or require the suspension of economic reform. Radical steps towards reform were similarly somewhat less popular in Slovakia that in the Czech lands (51 vs. 60 percent approval). Ironically, these views were held in spite of the broad rejection of the old regime demonstrated by popular Slovak support for the Velvet Revolution)^]. They also implied that Slovaks would be more reluctant to undergo the costs of economic transformation based on the principle of "detatization" than the Czechs.

Slovak Elite Character: Differences between Czech and Slovak elite character are often striking. The divergence dates back to the First Republic (1918-1938) and even before, but emerges in the current generation of leadership in their reaction to the 1968 Prague Spring movement. Czech Prague Spring reformers sought primarily to gain greater political and economic liberties within a socialist or western-style social democratic framework. The goals of Slovak reformers were not as clear-cut.

Given the rapid development of the Slovak economy under policies of equalization, the need for economic revitalization in Slovakia was not as pressing. Slovak communist reformers saw themselves first and foremost as Slovak "patriots." Their primary aim was "national self-assertion" rather than economic reform and democratization[8]. While some Slovaks shared the aims of Czech reformers, a significant portion of Slovak Prague Spring participants fell into the Czech hard liner (limited or anti-reform) camp on economic issues. One apparent fear of Slovaks was that "Czech-led" economic reforms would restore priority to Czech industry in planning and investment and thus set back nascent Slovak industrialization. On economic issues, therefore, many Slovak reformers were decidedly reactionary and status quo..

This cleared the way for a unique Slovak drive to establish autonomy within a federative Czech and Slovak republic. Czech reformers challenged the monopoly of the Communist Party on political life. They sought democratic reforms above all else-trusting that additional reforms would come soon thereafter. Slovak reformers, by contrast, rejected the formula of "democracy first" and focused their challenge more on the location of party power and the demand for "symmetry" in representation in Czechoslovak governing bodies[4].

By its very demands, the Slovak reform movement was less threatening to the communist regime. Given the example of the Soviet Union, there was certainly nothing contradictory between federal forms of government and Leninist principles[5]. Unlike in the early 1950s, hard line Soviet and Czechoslovak Communists were willing to accept that one could be both a good communist and a Slovak nationalist simultaneously-particularly if granting Slovaks some concessions would undermine their support of the fundamental challenges to one-party rule made by their Czech brethren. As one analyst has noted, their "need to consolidate Slovak commitment in crisis was paramount" [12].

With Soviet approval, hard liners thus granted Slovaks their demand for a federation. They had outgoing General Secretary of the Communist Party Alexander Dubcek sign the Agreement on Federation in Bratislava in October 1968. On paper, at least, the agreement went far towards granting many of the Slovak

reformers' demands.

When Dubcek was finally ousted in April 1969, pro-Soviet hard liners replaced him with Gustav Husak, whose Slovak credentials had been well established by a lengthy prison sentence in the 1950's for "nationalist deviation." During the Prague Spring, Husak had been a leading Slovak advocate of federalization and was, ironically, counted amongst the ranks of Prague Spring reformers. After the invasion, Husak's regime limited the extent and harshness of the post-invasion purge in Slovakia. Many Slovaks who had participated in the reform movement were allowed back into party ranks provided they signed a document approving the Warsaw Pact's "international assistance." Moreover, the apparent gains for the Slovak nation made signing such a humiliating document all the more easy: Slovaks benefited from the Husak regime's decision to pursue and even intensify policies of "equalization" in effect continuing the redistribution of dwindling Czech prosperity to Slovakia[8].

While the KSC Party bodies and ministries continued to be governed on the principles of democratic centralism and national asymmetry, Husak pursued an aggressive Slovak affirmative action program at top party levels. Henceforth, Slovaks would hold between 30 and 40 percent of all cabinet posts[8].

Czech '68 reformers, by contrast, were thoroughly purged—forced into exile, or allowed only to work as menial laborers. Moreover, while many could have and did sign documents "approving" of the Soviet invasion, they would for the most part, not be readmitted into political life or even the ranks of the Communist Party.

Thus, the line for naked, opportunistic collaboration with a patently disliked regime was clearly drawn in the Czech lands. In Slovakia, it was blurred. It was therefore more easily crossed. This was by no means insignificant. Dissidents in Slovakia thereafter never had the clear, unchallenged moral authority of Czech dissidents. Indeed, Husak and other Slovak communists rationalized collaboration with the Soviet invaders as an "act of patriotism" that served the interests of the Slovak nation[9]. Husak took this tact in his persecution of Czech Prague Spring reformers—many of whom were charged with not being sufficiently attentive to Slovak concerns or including Slovaks in reform planning.

In Slovakia, secular-civic activism against the regime was muted after 1970. Concessions on federalism; greater top-level representation; moderated purges; and a continuation of the upward mobility and improved standards of living that accompanied ongoing policies of equalization, combined to produce a greater tolerance of the status quo in Slovakia. After 1989, it also meant that those with a communist nomenclatura background retained some status.

In marked contrast to the Czech lands, most dissident activity in Slovakia centered around freedom of religious expression rather than a fight for civic and political rights. Of only seven Slovak trials involving secular dissidence during normalization, only two involved ethnic Slovaks. This "Slovak phenomenon" reached far into Slovakia's intellectual elite where even "dissident" writers and artists could find accommodation with the post-68 regime if they focused their attentions on achieving national expression and goals rather than democracy. Some Slovak's even apparently joined the Communist Party in the 1970's, in an explicit effort to, "keep the spirit of reform alive. Moreover, as young Slovak intellectuals grew into political life in the 1970s, they too, found conditions more accommodating that in the Czech lands, where intellectual life continued to be shaped by the exile or repression of leading thinkers[6]. By and large, the democratic agenda pursued by Prague Spring reformers and revitalized by the Charter 77 affirmation of the principles of Helsinki, had a smaller impact on political and intellectual life in Slovakia than it did in the Czech Lands[10].

In sum, Slovakia's contemporary ruling elite were socialized as willing participants in the middle and lower levels of the communist system, not dissenters. While this-is also true of a majority of contemporary Czech ruling elite, Slovakia's communist era produced only a weak, and largely marginalized, civic dissident movement that by 1989 lacked the ability to provide the strong national leadership of its Czech counterparts. Civic-dissident leadership in Public Against Violence, the Slovak counterpart to Civic Forum was limited to Miroslav Kusy and less than a handful of others. Not only did these individuals have no desire to retain political office, they found they needed to cooperate closely with moderate, reformist elements of the former communist Slovak nomenclatura to run the country. Fomer Communist Marian Calfa became Federal Prime Minister, for example. Meciar was not nomenclatura, but neither had he emerged from the civic dissident background of the VPN leadership. Indeed, his background until 1990 was notable for its complete lack of political activism.

Elites and the Problem of Slovak Statehood. Populism and paternalism, and the lack of an elite civic dissident movement character enabled but do not determine Slovakia's contemporary elite configuration. While Slovakia possesses strong elements of traditionalism and paternalism. The same can be said of Poland or Hungary. And while civic political culture has never taken deep roots in Slovakia, this is again not distinctly different from Slovakia's neighbors. The prevalence of populist beliefs and attitudes in those countries is about the same[13]. The exception is the Czechs who arguably developed perhaps the most robust civil society in the region prior to World War II. This was undermined by socialism, yet even following the Velvet Revolution, Czechs remained less traditionalist and paternalist than their Slovak neighbors, although there remained significant elements of each in Czech society[13].

A comparison of Slovakia with its Central European neighbors indicates that the country possesses the least robust accumulation of favorable conditions for democratic consolidation[10]. Slovakia has a higher degree of ethnic heterogeneity and an absence of a sustained, historical experience with statehood. Historically there has never been elite unity in Slovakia. For Slovak elites the debate on the national issue has been a fundamental divide since the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), beginning with debates between two Slovak elite groupings, the autonomists' on the one hand and Czechoslovaks' on the other. Under the early First Republic, Slovak autonomists were politically represented by Andrej Hlinka and the People's Party. They fought against Czech-centrism and Prague's drive to create a "Czechoslovak" nation. Czechoslovaks, many of whom were Slovak, argued against Slovak autonomy on political and cultural grounds. They emphasized the kinship and unity of Czech and Slovak cultures as a means of unifying the Slavic peoples in the face of threat of irredentist Hungarian and later Germanic claims. Czechoslovaks feared that greater Slovak autonomy would also mean greater Hungarian and .Germanic autonomy and eventual dissolution of the state[10].

There was also a significant paternalistic cultural component to the Czechoslovak argument. Czechoslovaks associated coexistence with the Czechs with more rapid "progress" that would make up for centuries of neglect under Hungarian rule. Advocates of Slovak autonomy emphasized the need for cultural isolation of the Catholic, traditional, and anti-liberal Slovak culture from the "Western-liberal, anti-religious" oriented Czechs.[11] Following World War II, autonomist strains in the Slovak Communist Party were harshly repressed under Klement Gottwald in the early-mid 1950s, but as we have seen, they reemerged in the form of a Slovak demand for federalization (rather than democratization) in the time of the Prague Spring. Autonomy again became the most crucial issue following the Velvet Revolution particularly after Czechoslovak Federal Minister of Finance, Vaclav Klaus introduced an inflexible program of radical shock therapy that generated national-populist complaints about "alien" solutions to Slovakia's problems once again being imposed from without.

In 1991, Meciar began to form a splinter political movement within VPN around old Slovak resentments against "prago-centrism" (the administration of Slovakia from Prague). Meciar was particularly good at creating and playing on fears and resentments that resonated with the semi-modernized segments of the Slovak electorate. He was aided by continuing insensitivity of Czech leadership to Slovak perceptions and the lack of a relatively sophisticated Slovak civil society. The radical economic reforms of Klaus and the moral guidence of President Vaclav Havel came under particular attack. Klaus's reforms, Slovak leaders stated or implied, were "a Czech invention, created in the Czech environment for Czech conditions, and most importantly, inappropriate for Slova-kia"[l I], Havel was reviled for, among other things, taking a moral stand against the export of weaponry (as much as 65 percent of Czechoslovak industrial defense production was in Slovakia)[12]. Following and then surpassing the lead of former religious dissident and Christian Democratic Movement leader Jan Camogursky, Meciar implied that given local control over the organs of government, the transition would go smoother in Slovakia.

Anti-communism, which played an important role in placing former communist nomenclatura in the Czech Lands on the defensive, had a less important role in Slovakia[13]. Meciar took a public stand against lustration (meaning, literally "purification") of Slovak officials with communist-era secret service ties and was supported in that stand by most Slovak elites. This weak anticommunist stand allowed industrial nomenclatura to begin to lobby aggressively for an active sectoral industrial policy and insider preference in privatization without the fear of a strong anti-communist backlash that faced their counterparts in the Czech Lands[12].

At first, the civic wing of VPN was almost entirely isolated on the political scene[13]. Indeed, in the 1992 general election, VPN did not even poll the necessary votes to clear the five percent threshold. Yet the bitter fight over issues surrounding secession from the Czech Republic and Prime Minister Meciar's intolerant and somewhat undemocratic leadership style created a new civic opposition comprised increasingly of alienated Czechosolvaks but then eventually extending to autonomists of a more civic democratic orientation as well as a sprinkling opportunists who lost in their own personal power struggles with the Prime Minister.

Meciar and his supporters "established" an independent Slovak Republic on January 1, 1993 following a pact between himself Czech Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus the winners of the June 1992 elections. The pact was reached and implemented without a referendum and against the will of the majority of the Czech and Slovak citizens[12].

Meciar and his group of "founders," never specifically elaborated a concept for building the new state. This might be because, prior to his meeting with Klaus, Meciar truly did not expect the dissolution of the Czechoslovak state except as a final resort. The concept of an "ethnic Slovak nation-state," however, was strongly present in the new government's policy. The preamble of the Slovak Constitution, for example, begins with a phrase, "We, the Slovak nation." Only later are ethnic minorities mentioned as "other citizens," but not as a part of the "Slovak nation." This implies the exclusion of national minorities from participating in state-formation and had a profoundly alienating effect on Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian minority[13].

Formally, the principle of inclusive citizenship exists, but the founders of the new Slovak state have

applied a principle of exclusion to maintain their bases of political support. This is not the formal, transparent exclusion that has afflicted ethnic Russians in the Baltics. Rather, in their rhetoric, Meciar and his supporting elites frequently divide citizens into informal categories of "good Slovaks," and Slovaks who were against the division of the former Czechoslovakia and independent statehood of the Slovak Republic. They also exclude ethnic Hungarians.

Hence, the leaders of the ruling coalition attempt to derive at least some of their legitimacy from their status as "founders" of the independent Slovak state. On this ground, they claim the right to prevent all who were against the separation of the Czech and Slovak Republic from participating in building the new Slovak state. They often tell both opposition leaders and representatives of the cultural elite, "You were against it-you have no right to talk" [13]. Inter-elite antagonism has been further exacerbated since Meciar was restored to power by the general election of fall 1994. Meciar's party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, and its two coalition partners, have cobbled together a ramshackle social alliance founded on the financial support of the old industrial nomenclatura and the voting strength of the rural, elderly and less educated. Educated, urban voters as well as new entrepreneurs in the finance and service sectors have tended to reject Meciar's populism as has Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian minority. But there has been no clear focus for these interests and their votes have been spread out across a wide range of programmatic and association-based parties.

Endnotes

1. Guillermo O'Donnell & Philippe C. Schmitter, Transitions From Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986), p. 37; For an argument that international constraints—particularly economic globalization—influence transition outcomes more than elite competition and leadership strategies, see, Paul G. Eewis, "Theories of Democratization and Patterns of Regime Change in Eastern Europe, Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, Vol. 13:1 (March 1997), pp. 4-26.
2. The deterioration of an initial pact will have the most significant adverse effect and is probably least likely where the old regime elites retain control over military or police assets. This has not been the case in Central Europe and particularly not in Slovakia where the armed forces and police have been returned in relatively short order to apolitical professional structures, Gould's correspondence with Major Patrick Antoinelli, United States Army, December 7, 1997.
3. See Valter Komarek, "Czech and Slovak Federal Republic: A New Approach," p. 66, and Jan Svejnar, "Czech and Slovak Federal Republics: A Solid Foundation," p. 22, in Richard Fortes, ed.. Economic Transformation in Central Europe: A Progress Report, (London: Center for Economic Policy Research and Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1993).
4. As one analysts commented: "soviet modernization is perverted modernization: it ostensibly builds up the body of modernity, but kills its soul. The communist laid down the roads, erected hydroelectric plants, and the like, but they killed (or tried their best to kill) the human capacity for autonomous action." G. Nodia , "How Different are Postcommunist Transitions?" Journal of Democracy , Vol. 7:4 (October 1996), p. 24.
5. Sona Szomolanyi, "Identifying Slovakia's Emerging Regime," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, p. 23.
6. Vladimir K-rivy, "Slovakia's Regions and the Struggle for Power," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, pp. 124-125.
7. Notes from Gould's interview with Jan Buncak, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Sociological Institute, November 11, 1996. Buncak is currently compiling a sociological survey of 1000 Slovak elites; Focusing particularly on Poland, Thomas A. Baylis argues that current elites in power in Central Europe were what one dissident has labeled the "lower nobility" of the communist era. Thomas A. Baylis, "Plus Ca Change? Transformation and Continuity Among East European Elites," Communist and Post-Communist Societies, Vol. 27:3, (1994), pp. 315-328.
8. Poll cited by Pithart, "Towards a Shared Freedom," in Musil, ed.. The End of Czechoslovakia , p. 201; See also, Sona Szomolanyi, "Old Elites in the New Slovak State and their Current Transformations," in Sona Szomolanyi and Grigorij Meseznikov, eds.. The Slovak Path of Transition—To Democracy" (Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association, 1994) p. 67. Carole Skalnik Left, National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918-1987, (Prmceton, Princeton University Press, 1988), Conclusion.
9. Miroslav Kusy "Slovak Exceptionalism," in Musil, ed. End of Czechoslovakia, pp. 139-157.
10. Ivan Miklos, "Economic Transition and the Emergence of Clientalist Structures in Slovakia," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, p. 60.
11. Hilary Appel, "Politico-Ideological Determinants of Liberal Economic Reform: The Case of Privatization." Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the North Eastern Political Science Association, November 15, 1997.
12. Zora Butorova, "Public Opinion in Slovakia: Continuity and Change," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, pp. 129-130.
13. Miroslav Kusy, "The State of Human and Minority Rights in Slovakia," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, pp. 169-186.