

Shvets Y.Y.

MODERN SLOVAKIA'S ELITE AGREEMENT AND SEPARATION IN 1990-1996

Elite theory makes predictions about regime types that are likely to endure or emerge on the basis of two variables, elite consensus and elite differentiation. The higher the elite consensus and the greater the elite differentiation, the more likely a state will be able to maintain a stable democracy. Slovakia's elite procedural consensus, established during the Velvet Revolution, had already begun to weaken by the first dismissal of Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar in March 1991; it has weakened even further since Slovak independence on January 1, 1993. Slovak elites, however, remain highly differentiated-increasing the chances that pacts and balances of power can be achieved that will maintain democratic practice in the face of fundamentally competing worldviews.

Elite theory contends that there are two components to elite compromise, elite unity and elite access to decision makers. One of the most important ramifications of the issue of Slovak statehood has been the divisive effect it has had on Slovak elites since at least the First Republic. This is exacerbated by the uniquely Slovak world vision of many of Meciar's national-populist supporters, a vision that simultaneously generates, reflects and reinforces the belief systems of Slovakia's less educated, rural and traditional cultural elements and is sharply opposed by the opposition's more civic-democratic world view.

Opposition elites would assert that the issue at the core of Slovakia's inter-elite conflict is the current ruling coalition's fundamentally undemocratic approach to the conduct of democracy. Ruling elites, the opposition argues, fail to understand or respect democratic rules and norms. Instead, they conceive of politics as warfare in which the ruling coalition alters the rules of the democratic game in their favor. They play a winner-take-all strategy in which they subordinate the standard rules and norms of democratic competition to retaining political power. [1]

Opposition perceptions are fiercely opposed by the unique worldview of the ruling coalition elite. Their worldview retains with a strong, but by no means dominant, measure of popular assent.[2]. The least cynical and most credulous of ruling coalition elites picture themselves as the founders and the protectors of the independent democratic Slovak state. They argue that most of the current opposition elites were against independence and thus have no right to specify what is right for Slovakia-even if opposition elites do it through the democratic process. Worse, they suspect opposition Slovak and ethnic Hungarian elites of being either naive or actively complicit in a conspiracy to grant Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian minority collective rights in preparation for the eventual annexation of Southern Slovakia into the Hungarian Republic. They are loath to forget that Hungary did just that after Munich in 1938. Nor do they omit to stress more than "1000 years of suffering" under Hungarian rule. They also warn that ethnic Slovaks have fared poorly in postwar Hungary and claim that as many as 25,000 ethnic Slovaks have been actively assimilated into the ethnic Hungarian population since the 1960's. Finally, they believe a wide range of international interests is conspiring against Slovakia. They fear that many neighbors, such as the Hungarians, and possibly even the Czechs and Austrians, seem intent on compromising the territorial integrity of the Slovakia. They argue that other interests-including international Jewish and financial conspiracies-are also complicit in the plot and, in addition, is intent punishing Slovakia for its refusal to allow foreign capital into the privatization process.[1]

However misguided, many ruling coalition elites thus see themselves as national patriots who possess the vision to see the "real" threats to Slovak sovereignty. These sentiments, however, overlap and intermingle with a wide range of actors with more opportunistic motives. Of particular importance is Slovakia's new industrial class, which includes a number of "privatization groups" – loosely organized networks of Slovak entrepreneurs and ex-communist nomenclatura with political connections and/or positions who have done extraordinarily well in the privatization process. By linking themselves to Meciar's ruling coalition they have gained insider access to power and wealth distributed through the privatization process. At industrial elite urging the government scuttled mass privatization in 1995 and provided industrialists with significant influence in subsequent privatization decisions. Slovak industrialists now justly fear that opposition groups want to re-nationalize some key properties in preparation for distributing it to other actors.

Despite the opportunism of some industrialists and the clear willingness of ruling coalition elites to deliberately construct threats as a means of mobilizing frustrated and frightened voters, some exceptional ruling coalition elites might indeed be entirely honest when they claim they believe in democratic rule. But given their perception of the dire threats surrounding them, they also believe that some compromise, or at least convenient redefinition of democratic principle is entirely justified to retain their political and material position and counter threats to Slovak sovereignty. Industrialists and other opportunist elites, meanwhile, have gone along out of self-interest.

The ruling elite's highly xenophobic worldview and their willingness to compromise democratic rules of the game, vastly constrains their ability to make domestic alliances. As a result, extreme elements of Slovak society have been mobilized and pushed into the center of political system. Since 1994, Meciar's HZDS has had to rule in cooperation with parties that have nothing in common but a common populist approach, shared values and considerable opportunism. Hence the country is currently ruled by a combination of HZDS with both the nationalist-right Slovak National Party (SNS) and the far-left Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS). In a country with a stronger elite consensus, this combination would appear absurd. Moreover, HZDS's extremist coalition partners would have been marginalized. In Slovakia, however, they take advantage of HZDS' inability to create a centrist coalition. Indeed, they are almost Meciar's only feasible coalition partners.[3] Unequal access to Decision Making: Slovakia's lack of elite consensus in fundamental political values and outlook has endangered Slovak democracy. Given the ruling coalition's conspiratorial and fearful world view, many industrial and coalition elites continue to

feel that draconian measures remain necessary to fulfill their objectives. Behind such rationale, the administration of Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar and his ruling Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) have systematically sought to limit the access of opposition elites to decision-making power. Indeed, they have taken a degree of control of Slovak political decision-making procedures that is inconsistent with parliamentary practice in Western democracies. This was best illustrated in a night session of the Slovak Parliament of November 3-4, 1994.

The night session violated standard Western rules and norms as well as established democratic practice in Slovakia. In a single sitting of Parliament, Meciar's parliamentary majority denied its minority opposition meaningful participation in institutions vital to democracy. Specifically, the ruling coalition excluded opposition members from meaningful participation on bodies monitoring and supervising important state functions, including: the Supreme Control Office, Special Control Body (OKO), the General Prosecutor's Office, and the National Property Fund (NPF).[4] Opposition exclusion from OKO was particularly critical as that body monitors the security service. Meciar's ruling coalition also selected top executives for Slovak Radio and the Board of TV and Radio Broadcasting from its ranks-effectively turning the public mass media into a partisan political servant.

The exclusion of the opposition extended to parliamentary bodies. The ruling coalition reduced the representation of opposition MP's on important parliamentary committees to levels far below their representation in Parliament. Nor did the ruling coalition allow opposition parties to choose specific MP's for those committee positions allotted to them. As of this writing, (November 1997), the ruling coalition has agreed to increase opposition representation on these committees and bodies, EU co-chair of the Joint EU-Slovakia Parliamentary Committee praises these moves, but adds that they have not gone far enough to allay EU concerns.[4]

Perhaps most importantly, by denying opposition elites regular access to decision making procedures, these exclusions undermined consensual unity of Slovak elites and have made it more likely that Slovak political competition will be seen by elites as a zero-sum game. This has done enormous damage to Slovakia's democratic prospects.

Since late 1994, however, a number of additional steps have further weakened democratic institutions in Slovakia. HZDS has built a party-state apparatus that makes political orientation-or; rumor has it, a well-placed bribe-prerequisite to favorable government treatment. This includes decisions as diverse as central state budget allocations to a village or a municipality, the award of government purchasing contracts, or a favorable privatization ruling by the Fund for National Property.[5] More recently, in apparent violation of a constitutional provision, the ruling coalition expelled Member of Parliament Frantisek Gaulieder from Parliament after he resigned from HZDS. It has since refused to heed Slovak Constitutional Court and European Parliament recommendations that he be reinstated. Finally, in May 1997, the government unilaterally canceled a referendum despite a Constitutional Court ruling that the decision on whether to hold the referendum rested with an independent referendum commission and not with the government. [6]

An additional challenge to opposition elite access to decision making has been HZDS steps to monopolize channels for societal interest group representation. Darina Malova HZDS calls this mode of interest group representation "party-state corporatism." It typically consists of an effort by the dominant ruling party or parties to either establish party-affiliated or party-controlled interest group monopolies in a certain field, take control ("colonize") of existing societal interest groups, or establish and support parallel interest groups that compete with independent societal interest groups in their particular field. Malova demonstrates how this form of societal interest group representation has become a standard control mechanism of the current coalition over the past two years. Party-state corporatism is actually a more sophisticated way of establishing the hegemony of the ruling party under the conditions of formal democracy.

Again, new elite theory would point out that the result of HZDS actions to deny equal access to decision-making for all elites is the likelihood that politics in Slovakia will come to be perceived as a winner-take-all form of political warfare. The fundamental challenge to democratic rules of the game has led Western diplomats to repeatedly voice their displeasure and issue numerous informal complaints and formal diplomatic demarches to the Slovak government. The Slovak government's apparently inadequate response to Western complaints and concerns, moreover have led the governing bodies of the European Union and NATO to exclude Slovakia from the first wave of accession talks to both institutions.[3] The failure has had little impact on ruling coalition policies. Opposition Slovak elites speculate that these actions prove that the ruling coalition would rather subvert the 1998 election rather than risk losing it in a free and fair vote.

Elite Differentiation: While Slovak elites are polarized into divided elite camps, they are also highly differentiated, as is characteristic of an industrialized society. [5] This is perhaps best demonstrated by the political groupings that have formed since 1989. According to Lukas and Szomolanyi, the Slovak political party system is characterized by "fragmented polarization." [4] In addition, to the seemingly untenable red-brown alliance combining extreme right (SNS) and extreme left (ZRS) into a single coalition with HZDS, the opposition Slovak Democratic Coalition similarly contains strange bedfellows-ranging from the conservative Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), Democratic Party (DS) and Democratic Union (DU) on the right, to the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS) and Greens (SZS) on the left. Unallied to the Slovak Democratic Coalition-but still in the opposition-is Slovakia's successor party to the Communists, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL). The SDL has successfully shed its communist past and now functions well as a mainstream European social democratic party. Finally, the left-right spectrum is repeated across Slovakia's spectrum of smaller, loosely aligned Hungarian parties.

The wide differentiation of Slovak parties demonstrates that the polarization of its elites is not socio-economically based. Left and right are incorporated into all three of Slovakia's coalition groupings-Meciar's

ruling coalition, the Slovak Democratic Coalition, and the smaller ethnic Hungarian coalition. Perhaps as importantly, a major potential coalition partner for both SDC and the Meciar's HZDS could be the Party of the Democratic Left. Indeed, it is hard to use class terms to explain how a communist-turned-social democratic movement could become a central coalition broker after the next election.

In short, Slovakia's political elite has not polarized over traditional "programmatic" issues that can be ranged on a typical left-right spectrum. Rather, polarization reflects each side's base in the wider continuum along axes of ethnicity, tradition and modernity, rural and urban behavioral tendencies, and past and present position on issues of Slovak independence and identity. The implication is that there is little programmatically to bind the ruling or opposition elite poles. These political poles are entirely creations of identity and perception and a common fear of what would happen if power shifted, or does not shift, to the other pole.

Endnotes:

1. After the split VPN transformed into the Civic Democratic Union.
2. Miroslav Kusy, "The State of Human and Minority Rights in Slovakia," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, pp. 169-186.
3. Sona Szomolanyi, "Does Slovakia Deviate from the Central European Transition Path?" in Sona Szomolanyi and Grigorij Meseznikov, eds., Slovakia: Parliamentary Elections, 1994, (Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association, 1995). HZDS pragmatists and SDL "soft liners" have maintained a flirtatious relationship over the years. Many speculate that a future coalition could be formed from a reformed SDL, shorn of its hard line opponents to cooperation with Meciar, and a faction of HZDS that excludes its more extremist national-populist elements. See, Vladimir Jancura, "The Courting of Pragmatists," Pravda, (September 23, 1997), p. 4; While such an alliance would be more centrist than the current coalition government, this alliance might still leave HZDS officials with a fundamentally undemocratic world view in charge and thus would not go as far as the elite pact advocated that we advocate below in building Slovak democracy.
4. Despite its majority, the ruling coalition did not actually form a cabinet until a month later. Until then, the cabinet was actually in the minority opposition.
5. For more on state-party-society clientalism, see Miklos, "Emergence of Clientalist Structures," and Krivy, "Slovakia's Regions and the Struggle for Power," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia.
6. For more on these events, see Szomolanyi, "Identifying Slovakia's Emerging Regime;" pp. 9-34. For a developed discussion of constitutionalism in Slovakia, see, Katarina Zavacka, "The Development of Constitutionalism in Slovakia," in Szomolanyi and Gould, eds., Slovakia, pp 157-168.