

The Apostles to the Slavs versus the Velvet Revolution. The Use of History in the Struggle for Democracy in Slovakia during the 1990s

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Slovakia's entry into the EU and NATO in 2004, its joining the Schengenland at the end of 2007 and the introduction of the Euro on 1st of January, 2009 make it easy to forget that even as recently as the second half of the 1990s it was considered the black sheep among countries undergoing transformation, as a problem child whose efforts at integration were in acute danger.¹

The reason lay in the authoritarian tendency of the governing coalition from 1994 to 1998 under Prime minister Vladimír Mečiar and his "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia" (HZDS).² In its position paper on Slovakia's entry application the European Commission came to the conclusion in mid-1997 that

"the present government does not fully respect the role and responsibilities of the other institutions and frequently adopts an attitude which goes beyond the confrontations traditionally accepted in a democracy".³

For example a Parliamentarian who no longer wanted to vote with the coalition was excluded from Parliament; the president, who denounced the practices of the government was systematically humiliated; the intelligence service was involved in the kidnapping of his son; decisions of the Constitutional Court, which the governing coalition did not like were ignored; the Hungarian minority (10 % of the population) were presented in the state media as a fifth column; proposed laws restricted the rights of minorities.⁴ In other words: within a basically established and functioning institutional system a form of politics started being practiced which considered the rule

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 2. K. HENDERSON, *Slovakia. The Escape from Invisibility*, Routledge, London/New York, 2002; R. KIPKE, K. VODIČKA, *Slowakische Republik. Studien zur politischen Entwicklung*, Lit, Münster, 2000; D. MALOVÁ, M. RYBÁŘ, *The European Union's policies towards Slovakia. Carrots and sticks of political conditionality*, in: J. RUPNIK, J. ZIELONKA (eds.), *The Road to the European Union. Volume 1. The Czech and Slovak Republics*, Manchester University Press, Manchester/New York, 2003, pp.98-112.
 3. European Commission, *Agenda 2000 – Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application for Membership of the European Union*, Brussels, 15th July 1997.
 4. M. BÚTORA, P. HUNČÍK (eds.), *Global Report on Slovakia. Comprehensive Analyses from 1995 and Trends from 1996*, IVO, Bratislava, 1997; M. BÚTORA, T.W. SKLADONY (eds.), *Slovakia 1996-1997. A Global Report on the State of Society*, IVO, Bratislava, 1998; M. KOLLÁR, G. MESEŽNIKOV, T. NICHOLSON (eds.), *Slovakia 1998-1999. A Global Report on the State of Society*, IVO, Bratislava, 1999.

of law, separation of powers as well as pluralism (societal, political, cultural) not as something understood but rather as a burden.

In the autumn of 1998 the forces which led Slovakia to the brink of international isolation suffered a clear defeat in the parliamentary elections.⁵ The previous opposition formed a coalition including representatives of the Hungarian minority. Agreeing on a same goal, i.e. on the entry into the EU, the new government decisively dissociated itself from the practices of its predecessor. Already in October 1999 the Commission affirmed “Thanks to the changes introduced since September 1998 Slovakia now fulfils the Copenhagen political criteria”.⁶

In the confrontation between authoritarianism and liberal democracy that characterised Slovak politics in the 1990s, at the level of discourse a large role is played by differing historical interpretations. Both camps sought to interpret the past in such a way that pushed specific values to the fore and marginalised others. Did Slovak history confirm the importance of values such as sovereignty, unity, national culture or of civil society, rule of law, openness to the world? The discovery and denegation of tradition, according to the Austrian diplomat Emil Brix a characteristic of Central Europe,⁷ is supposed to provide these terms and their proponents with legitimacy. The attempts on the one hand to take political advantage of Saints Cyril and Methodius and on the other hand the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 are good examples for this.

Cyril and Methodius

After 1989 there was a renaissance of the national patron saints all over East Central Europe. In Slovakia there was also the attempt to fall back on politicised saints, largely secularised symbolic figures, in order to transfer their values meant to serve as “link between state, ruler and citizenry”.⁸

The so-called “Cyrilo-Methodian inheritance” as a Slavic or outright Slovak peculiarity – the phrase was first used by the Roman Catholic cleric and “first Slovak

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5. M. BÚTORA et al. (eds.), *The 1998 Parliamentary Elections and Democratic Rebirth in Slovakia*, IVO, Bratislava, 1999.
 6. European Commission, *Regular Report on Slovakia's Progress Towards Accession*, Brussels, 13th October 1999.
 7. E. BRIX, *Die Rolle von Geschichte im politischen Wandel Mitteleuropas*, in: H. GRUBER, F. MENZ, O. PANAGL (eds.), *Sprache und politischer Wandel*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a. M., 2003, pp.13-22, p.14.
 8. S. SAMERSKI, K. ZACH, *Einleitung*, in: S. SAMERSKI (ed.), *Die Renaissance der Nationalpatrone. Erinnerungskulturen in Ostmitteleuropa im 20./21. Jahrhundert*, Böhlau, Köln/Weimar/Wien, 2007, pp.1-9, p.4.

historian”⁹ Juraj Papánek (1738-1802)¹⁰ – was a discovery or as it were an invention of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The distance in the past, the paucity of sources and the complexity of tradition make possible many varied interpretations of the historical impact of the “Apostles to the Slavs” – and often connected with them – the Great Moravian Empire,¹¹ in the construct of which politics, church and science each played a part in continuously bringing out new facets straight into the 21st century.¹² An important component was added by Pope John Paul II with the papal bull “Egrediae virtutis” of December 31, 1980, when he proclaimed Saints Cyril and Methodius “co-patrons of Europe”. Until then only Saint Benedict of Nursia held this honorary title.

For the Slovak national movement of the 19th century the remembrance of the “Apostles to the Slavs” was an important element in stressing the marginalisation of the Slovak nation by the dominant Magyars and the ancient tradition of the Slovak/Slavic culture. A goal of the militants around Ľudovít Štúr during the Revolution of 1848 was, “to win the Slovak earth back from the Hungarians, upon which Saints Cyril and Methodius once walked”.¹³ In the spirit of pan-Slavic brotherhood which was also an idea active in the Slovak national movement, the common veneration of Cyril and Methodius helped in the development of contacts with Serbia and Russia.¹⁴ In addition to these components the association of the apostles to the Slavs with Roman Catholicism increasingly came to the fore. The Hungarian authorities saw the veneration of Cyril and Methodius as competing with the state-favoured cult of Saint Stephen. Participation in the celebration of the year 1863 in Moravian Velehrad, where the grave of Saint Methodius was presumed to be located, was forbidden to Hungarian (in this case Slovak) citizens. Articles about Great Moravia were banned from the Slovak school books.¹⁵ In the inter-war period the largest Slovak party, the autonomist Slovak People’s Party of the Roman Catholic priest Andrej Hlinka, fostered the commemoration of Cyril and Methodius as a Slovak idiosyncrasy,¹⁶ while the Czech politicians appealing to the same tradition placed the common historical inheritance in the foreground.¹⁷ During the Second World War the Cyrilo-Methodian

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9. A. MAŤOVČÍK et al., *Slovak biographical dictionary, Matica slovenská*, Martin, 2002, pp.274 f.
 10. V. TURČAN, *Cyril a Metod – trvalé dedičstvo?*, in: E. KREKOVIC, E. MANNOVÁ, E. KREKOVICOVÁ (eds.), *Mýty naše slovenské*, Academic Electronic Press, Bratislava, 2005, pp. 36-41, p.41.
 11. S. ALBRECHT, *Geschichte der Großmährenforschung in den Tschechischen Ländern und in der Slowakei*, Slovanský Ústav AV ČR, Praha, 2003; M. EGGERS, *Das Erzbistum des Method. Lage, Wirkung und Nachleben der kyrillomethodianischen Mission*, Sagner, München, 1996.
 12. Overview in E. KOWALSKÁ, *Kyrill und Method. Ihre Tradition in Politik und Geisteswelt der Slowakei*, in: S. SAMERSKI (ed.), *Die Renaissance der Nationalpatrone. Erinnerungskulturen in Ostmitteleuropa im 20./21. Jahrhundert*, Böhlau, Köln/Weimar/Wien, 2007, pp.116-127.
 13. I. KRUŽLIAK, *Zrod slovenskej cirkevnej provincie (I.)*, in: *Slovenská republika*, vol.5(1998), p.9.
 14. V. BUCHTA, *Kontakty slovenských národných dejateľov s pravoslávnyim duchovenstvom v 19. storočí*, in: *Jubilejní Sborník k 1100. výročí smrti sv. Metoděje, arcibiskupa Velké Moravy*, Ústřední církevní nakladatelství, Praha, 1985, pp.171-198.
 15. S. ALBRECHT, *Großmährenforschung*, op.cit., p.29 with further bibliographical references.
 16. L. LIPTÁK, *Slovensko v 20. storočí*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 2000, p.45.
 17. S. ALBRECHT, *Großmährenforschung*, op.cit., p.69.

and Great Moravian traditions were among the ideological components most frequently used by the Slovak state.

After the Communist takeover the Great Moravian and the Cyrilo-Methodian threads unravelled. While the research into Great Moravia was provided with generous funding, Saints Cyril and Methodius belonged to those symbols which were problematic for the regime. Although their holiday, the 5th of July, was a “Day of Commemoration” [pamätný deň], in fact this categorisation represented a demotion to that of a third-rank holiday. That Cyril and Methodius were not incorporated into the state ideology was an indication that the tradition was tainted with the stigma of Slovak nationalism as well as of Roman Catholicism – for the same reason the plans of the KSČ Central Committee in 1949 to support a Czechoslovak “Cyrilo-Methodian National Church” which would be independent from Rome and easier to control and manage, were dropped.¹⁸ On the contrary the commemoration of Cyril and Methodius developed into an expression of criticism of the regime. Circa 250,000 people, mainly Slovaks, took part in the festivities in 1985 commemorating the 1100th year of Saint Methodius’ death in Velehrad. The representative of the government was booed during his speech when he tried to present Cyril and Methodius as bringers of culture and as educators without using the adjective “Saint”.¹⁹

National Patron Saints after 1989

The discussion about the “correct” interpretation of the “Cyrilo-Methodian inheritance” began almost directly after the upheaval of 1989. Even before the first free parliamentary elections of 8th and 9th June 1990 the Federal Parliament raised July 5th to the status of State holiday with a day off from work, in other words to a public holiday of the highest order. From the Czech perspective, the “unity of Czechs and Slovaks, their common Christian culture”²⁰ should be expressed. The fact that Jan Hus did not receive the same acclaim²¹ (his holiday remained a simple day of commemoration) was criticized by some Czechs; this indicates that the symbolism of the saints was primarily Slovak.

Whereas in the Czech Republic, especially in the area of state symbolism, the commemoration of Cyril and Methodius played only a very marginal role in the 1990s, in Slovakia there were persistent efforts to integrate both of the saints into the corpus of founding myths of the state. In the preamble to the Slovak constitution

18. J. HALKO, *Rozbití Cirkev: Rozkolnická Katolícka akcia*, Lúč, Bratislava, 2004.

19. R. KÖHLER, *Der 1100. Todestag des hl. Method in der tschechoslowakischen Presse*, in: *Dokumentation Ostmitteleuropa*, vol.13(1987), n.5/6, pp.349-435; P. RAMET, *Christianity and National Heritage among the Czechs and Slovaks*, in: P. RAMET (ed.), *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham/London, 1989, pp.264-285.

20. Federal Assembly, Stenographic Minutes of the 27th Session on April 23rd, 1990, Point 22.

21. Federal Assembly, Stenographic Minutes of the 28th Session on May 9th, 1990, Point 27; Stenographic Minutes of the 27th Session on April 23rd, 1990, Point 22.

promulgated in autumn 1992 a reference to the “Cyrilo-Methodian” spiritual inheritance was included. After the division of Czechoslovakia on January 1st, 1993 a portrait of the Saints was put on the 50-Crown note.²²

Three reasons may have made the appeal to the saints an indispensable component of the legitimating narrative of the forces responsible for founding the state, particularly Mečiar’s HZDS: first of all the “Apostles to the Slavs” were firmly anchored in the mainstream of the Slovak national movement in the 19th century and the autonomist politics until 1939, secondly the – justified – expectation that the Slovak Roman Catholic Church would not fail to give its support to a political system coloured in this way, thirdly the “European” dimension of the saints introduced personally by the Pope, which exquisitely fit the international trend of seeking and finding “Europe” references in the national histories of the peoples of Central Europe.

Neither the obvious anachronisms of the retrospective projection into the 9th century of a “Slovak nation” nor the factual incorrectness of central assertions (namely the area was already Christian before the arrival of the missionaries,²³ on the territory of Slovakia there is no evidence of continuous cultural accomplishments from the Cyrilo-Methodian mission)²⁴ led immediately to political controversy in Slovakia, but rather the initially ambivalent geopolitical implications. The Western orientation declared by the government leadership was thwarted by their choice of symbols. Particularly in 1993, the first year of independence, as uncertainty reigned with respect to the foreign policy objectives of the Slovak Republic, the “pan-Slavic” potential of the apostles to the Slavs led to concerns.²⁵ The pinnacle of the state did not grant the myth of the saints any further anti-western tone in a geo-political sense. Politicians such as Prime minister Vladimír Mečiar (HZDS) and the president of the Parliament Ivan Gašparovič (HZDS) made an effort to avoid the clearly eastward-slanted interpretations. The saints were seen as the bearers of Christianity rather than as the founders of “Slavic reciprocity”.²⁶ An accentuation of this kind fits in well with the interpretation of the acts of the two saints which the Pope confirmed in the 1980s and during his two visits to Slovakia in 1990 and 1995.²⁷

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22. S. MIHÁLIKOVÁ, *Zwischen Kreuz und Europastern. Politische Symbolik in der Slowakei*, Lit, Münster, 2004, p.72 f.
23. V. VAVŘINEK, *Der Brief des mährischen Fürsten Rastislav an den Kaiser Michael III.*, in: E. KONSTANTINOU (ed.), *Methodius und Kyrillos in ihrer europäischen Dimension*, Lang, Frankfurt a. M., 2005, p.332.
24. V. TURČAN, *Cyril a Method*, op.cit., p.41.
25. S. BOMBÍK, *Slovensko – most k pravoslávneému Východu?*, in: *Národná obroda*, 01.03.1993.
26. P. SÍKA, *Idea slovanskej vzájomnosti a dnešok*, in: E. KOLLÁROVÁ, *Dedičstvo sv. Cyrila a sv. Metoda v slovenskej a bulharskej kultúre*, Národné osvetové centrum, Bratislava, 1996, pp.6-18.
27. F. HOPPENBROUWERS, *Nationalistic Tendencies in the Slovak Roman Catholic Church*, in: *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol.18(1998), n.6, p.24-45.

The Europe – Slovakia Relationship

In the mid-1990s with recourse to texts from the milieu of the Matica slovenská Cultural Association and to statements of representatives of the Church including the Pope, there developed an official, state-supported interpretation of the “Cyrilo-Methodian” tradition. The president of the Slovak National Council, Ivan Gašparovič (HZDS), at the annual celebration on July 5th only had to put the prepared phrases together:²⁸

“The Slovak people belong to the oldest inhabitants of Europe [...]. Our rich past and the sustained cultural inheritance are the source of our self-confidence, are the pillars of our process of self-determination, which culminated in the formation of the independent and democratic Slovak state. At the beginning of this centuries-long road stand the two brothers from Thessaloniki, Cyril and Methodius, who became not only the propagators of Christian philosophy, faith and religion, but also of the general culture and the political and societal structures of those times. [...] We can therefore say that the ancient Slovak community was linked to the cradle of European civilisation”.²⁹

Through the systematic underscoring of the European history and culture of the Slovaks arose the concept of a normative political understanding of Europeanness. The president of the Constitutional Court defended the inclusion of the references to Cyril and Methodius in the Slovak constitution:

“Archaeological and historical finds scientifically show that the Cyrilo-Methodian cultural and spiritual inheritance is in no way a fable, upon which to base the historicity of the Slovaks and their law on the territory where they have lived for hundreds of years and developed themselves into a modern nation. Into a nation that long ago fulfilled all European criteria”.³⁰

In view of the alleged European roots that have marked Slovakia during centuries, the new European criteria, namely the Copenhagen accession criteria, could only arouse a technocratic, artificial, arbitrary impression.

On the basis of the inseparable link with the tradition of national self-determination, the relatively non-committal tenor, as was the case for example with the president of the Parliament, tilted easily towards an aggressive and illiberal line of attack. Thus according to the member of Parliament Dušan Slobodník (HZDS) Slovakia was divided into two camps. In the first camp were to be found those who, “bore upon their shoulders the idea of Slovak statehood all the way to its completion” and who were intellectually supported by the “Cyrilo-Methodian tradition” as “the foundation of Slovak history”. In the other camp were to be found the “anti-Slovak free Euro-

28. For example compare *Vianočné posolstvo Slovákov zo stredu Európy*, in: *Republika*, 18.12.1993; *Čas pre hlas proroka*, Roman Kaliský's interview with Ján Chryzostomos Cardinal Korec, in: *Literárny týždenník*, 16.06.1995; *Pochvala Cyrilovi a Metodovi*, in: *Slovenské národné noviny*, 05.07.1991.

29. *Odkaz cyrila a metoda nás zaväzuje*, in: *Slovenská republika*, 06.07.1996.

30. M. ČIČ, *Solúnski bratia a naša ústava*, in: *Slovenská republika*, 06.07.1996.

peans”, “who are tied to unspecified West-European currents” and who take part in “anti-Cyrilo-Methodian and anti-Mečiarist Sabbaths”.³¹

The chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for European affairs, Augustín Marián Húška (HZDS), defended the government coalition practices against criticism from the EU:

“Our national roots and loyalty to the Cyrilo-Methodian traditions help us turn a blind eye against the constant attack from Europe. Incidentally, that is a newly heathen Europe, in which Christianity does not govern”.³²

The orchestration of the “Cyrilo-Methodian inheritance” essentially took on a new dimension, if not anti-West in the geopolitical sense, in order to be able to justify an illiberal political practice. The dominance of this and the related symbolism of “romantic existential nationalism”³³ (Great Moravia as the first Slovak state, the fateful antagonism between Hungary and Slovakia, the mystification of Ľudovít Štúr, etc.) made it difficult for the champions of a liberal democratic agenda to convey the urgency of their cause, namely the focus on rule of law, economic reform and open society.

The Upheaval of 1989

For the opposition the question arose what could be used to oppose the nationalist and authoritarian forces organisationally, programmatically, but also in an emotional respect. With regards to content, the alternative concept was based on a decidedly pro-Western domestic and foreign policy – the accession to the EU and NATO should not only be a foreign policy goal but rather become the goal. The “developed Europe” [vyspelá Európa], understood as the states of West Europe, should provide the model for the structuring of the political commonwealth, not only formally, but rather also in relation to the political culture. This programme was certainly popular (EU-accession) on the one hand,³⁴ but on the other hand in the mid-1990s there still prevailed an ambivalence or lack of understanding in the population (NATO-accession, “pure” market economy, “democracy” as the primary political concern).³⁵ Besides, it was stand-offish, prosaic, and more than that slightly „un-Slovak”. In order to make identification easier the return to autochthonous Slovak roots was necessary, a tie to some element of Slovak history in which such an orientation appeared previously.

31. *Rozhovor s Dušanom Slobodníkom*, in: *Republika*, 08.08.1994.

32. Augustín Marián Húška in August 1997 at the celebration in honour of Andrej Hlinka, printed in L. KOPEČEK, *Politické strany na Slovensku 1989 až 2006*, CDK, Brno, 2007, p.142.

33. T. PICHLER, *Národ, národnosti, štát: o politike etnického entuziazmu*, in: *Historický časopis*, vol. 54(2006), n.4, pp.570-574.

34. Central and Eastern Eurobarometer, retrievable under <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp>.

35. Z. BŮTOROVÁ, *Vývoj postojev verejnosti: od nespokojnosti k politickej zmene*, in: M. BŮTORA, G. MESEŽNIKOV, Z. BŮTOROVÁ (eds.), *Slovenské voľby '98: Kto? Prečo? Ako?*, IVO, Bratislava, 1999, pp.61-84.

However, almost all of Slovak history, from Cyril and Methodius to the tragic freedom fighters in the 19th century (Ľudovít Štúr and his followers), and even the year 1968, was usurped by the political opponents. This had its reasons: even if it could be argued that Slovakia has a Western culture, even in the brightest moments of Slovak political history liberal democracy was never reflected as the goal of development, simply because Slovak history was preponderantly read as purely national history. In 1848 Ľudovít Štúr chose to be on the side of reaction (Austria). In the inter-war period Andrej Hlinka's autonomist programme included national emancipation, not individual freedom within the frame of an ideologically neutral constitutional state. The so-called First Slovak Republic (1939-1945) was a satellite of the Third Reich, an authoritarian state with numerous elements of fascism and an acutely repressive anti-Jewish legislation.³⁶ From the perspective of the 1990s the question was raised whether the fact that the Slovak nation had possessed statehood should be looked at positively. Not only Mečiar's smaller coalition partner, the openly nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), but also the opposition Christian Democratic Party (KDH) and the Roman Catholic Church of Slovakia had difficulty in clearly distancing themselves from the Tiso regime.³⁷ No political force could however openly avow itself to the First Slovak Republic. Silence was the normal way of dealing with this chapter of Slovak history. In contrast to the Slovak Republic, the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 was claimed by all sides as a historical marker and an important test in which the Slovak nation showed its democratic maturity. It was however, because of its instrumentalisation by the Communists as well as by virtue of the facts,³⁸ understood as a "left" tradition.³⁹ Finally, according to a common view, in 1968 the Slovaks prioritised the nation once more, as they gave the federalisation of the Czechoslovak state at least the same importance as its democratisation.⁴⁰

There only remained the linkage to the recent past, the upheaval of 1989, which was initiated in Czechoslovakia by the Prague demonstration of November 17th, 1989. The opposition MP František Šebej came to the conclusion in 1995, after the most recent election victory of Vladimír Mečiar:

"In November 1989 was born [...] the only tradition to which we as free people today can appeal in the establishing of a state. [...] In November 1989 a vision of a free civil society began to form – astonishingly mature and concrete. And it began right away to become reality – actually precisely in that moment when those [...] began anew to destroy and

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36. M. LACKO, *Slovenská republika 1939-1945*, Perfekt, Bratislava, 2008; D. KOVÁČ, *Dejiny Slovenska, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny*, Praha, 1998, pp.217-244.
37. L. KOPEČEK, *Politické strany*, op.cit., pp.438-424; *Die Zeit*, 27.09.2007.
38. I. KAMENEC, *Dvojsječnosť mýtov o Slovenskom národnom povstaní*, in: E. KREKOVIČ, E. MANNOVÁ, E. KREKOVIČOVÁ (eds.), *Mýty naše slovenské*, Academic Electronic Press, Bratislava, 2005, pp.199-206.
39. S. BOMBÍK, *Bližšie k Európe. Študie a články*, Slovenská nadácia pre európske štúdie, Bratislava, 1995, p.32; Ľ. LIPTÁK, *Slovensko*, op.cit., p.271.
40. S. SIKORA, *Rok 1968 a politický vývoj na Slovensku*, Pro Historia, Bratislava, 2008, pp.104-106; J. ŽATKULIAK, *Le Printemps tchéco-slovaque dans le contexte du monde bipolaire et de la détente*, in: F. FEJTŐ, J. RUPNIK (eds.), *Le Printemps tchécoslovaque 1968*, Éd. Complexe, Bruxelles, 1999, pp. 100-112.

annihilate it. [...] We do not need a new vision of the Slovak society and state. We must only return to November 1989”.⁴¹

Apart from the National Uprising, “November 1989” was the most positively viewed event in Slovak history among the population in the mid-1990s. In a poll carried out in October 1997 53 % of those asked judged “November 1989” as a very or somewhat positive event in Slovak history, only 16 % very negatively or somewhat negatively.⁴² Therein lay a certain amount of paradox, because at the same time there was nostalgia for the time before 1989 (the 1970s and the 1980s were judged by people as being more positive than negative) and the appraisal was widespread that one’s own living conditions had worsened since that time.

Not too surprisingly competition about who may take the credit for the “Revolution” began early. Between 1994 and 1997 the Christian democratic and liberal opposition parties succeeded in “appropriating” the Revolution for themselves, that is to say they positioned themselves as the authentic leaders of its ideals. Thus the elections of 1998 took on the character of a vote about a “return to the values of 1989”.⁴³ In fact, however, only then the “legacy of the Revolution” was defined more precisely.⁴⁴

November 1989 – a Revolution?

The Slovak counterpart to Václav Havel’s Civic Forum in the Czech Lands was the “Public Against Violence” (VPN). There was a noticeable contrast between the efforts of the VPN during the first months after November 1989, to remain on the path of legality, to prevent retributions and to integrate moderate communists in their ranks⁴⁵ and the later insistence of its representatives on the term “Revolution”. Political science considers the events in Slovakia as an “implosion of the governing communist elite”.⁴⁶ In the term “revolúcia” however pulsed both the pathos of the historical grandeur and the necessity of further development for the better. Reinhart Koselleck even finds in the term the element of a secular salvation, as well as the

41. F. ŠEBEJ, *O plameni a nočných motýľoch*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 1996, p.179.

42. Z. BŮTOROVÁ, *Slovensko pred voľbami. Ludia – názory – súvislosti*, IVO, Bratislava, 1998, pp. 98-107.

43. As for example M. BŮTORA, G. MESEŽNIKOV, Z. BŮTOROVÁ, *Introduction: Overcoming Illiberalism – Slovakia’s 1998 Elections*, in: M. BŮTORA et al., *The 1998 Parliamentary Elections and Democratic Rebirth in Slovakia*, IVO, Bratislava, 1999, p.11.

44. L. LIPTÁK, *Koniec mýtov na Slovensku?*, in: E. KREKOVIČ, E. MANNOVÁ, E. KREKOVIČOVÁ (eds.), *Mýty naše slovenské*, Academic Electronic Press, Bratislava, 2005, p.241.

45. S. SZOMOLÁNYI, *Political Elites and Slovakia’s Transition Path*, in: *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, vol.1(2000), pp.16-32, pp.21-22.

46. S. SZOMOLÁNYI, *Prehistória, zrod a rola aktéra novembra ‘89 – VPN*, in: I. ANTALOVÁ (ed.), *Verejnosť proti násiliu 1989-1991. Svedectvá a dokumenty*, Nadácia Milana Šimečku, Bratislava, 1998, pp.13-21; S. SZOMOLÁNYI, *Kľukatá cesta Slovenska k demokracii*, Stimul, Bratislava, 1999, pp.19-25.

immanent compulsion to take sides.⁴⁷ A revolution furthermore demands energy and courage. The term corresponded to the term “totalita” [totality, totalitarian regime] for the entire period 1948-1989 (excepting the year 1968). Both terms reflected a strongly dichotomised view, according to which a sharp division into good-evil, decent-corrupt was possible. The “totality” could only be overcome by a “revolution”, because with evil no trade-off was permissible. Freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law could tolerate, at least rhetorically, no concessions.

The contrast between the scientific appraisal and the political interpretation in the course of the struggle over the character of the regime in the 1990s at times was spectacular. According to the opposition politician Martin Bútora, the “Revolution” of 1989 began because “the citizens” in Slovakia challenged the ruling regime.

„After seven years the Revolution returned to the place where it began. After seven years we again hear the citizens calling for dialogue. From the side of the powerful we again hear threats, insults, and the call for sanctions”.⁴⁸

As in 1944 and 1968 “the Slovaks” in 1989 had “accomplished deeds in accordance with the times” and have “advanced along a broad front towards being a democratic polity”. The sociologist Martin Bútora saw the events a bit differently:

“In November 1989 an overwhelming majority of people in Slovakia accepted political change passively. The Communist regime did not break down as a result of massive popular opposition in Slovakia; it crumbled due to the domino-effect provoked by the fall of the Berlin wall and the huge demonstrations in Prague”.⁴⁹

Also Timothy Garton Ash views “Havel’s Velvet Revolution above all as a phenomenon of the Czech Lands”.⁵⁰ In the mobilisation against “Mečiarism”⁵¹ however, a reinterpretation took place. In hindsight the “Revolution” was the conscious decision of the citizens of Slovakia for the West, therefore first a democratic act, secondly a pro-active act. In the public commemoration of the Revolution dominated by the opposition, the international context, that is the steps towards liberalization in the Soviet Union and even the role of the Czech dissidents, was somewhat neglected, in order to remember more vividly the Slovak contribution, i.e. the demonstrations in Bratislava and in the second largest city, Košice .

47. R. KOSELLECK, *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 2006, pp.244-245.

48. M. BÚTORA, *Dnes sa odpovedá na to, kto sú Slováci*, Speech at the meeting „Zachráňme kultúru“, Bratislava, 05.09.1996, http://www.martinbutora.sk/texty_zachranme_kulturu.htm (retrieved 19.07.2009.).

49. M. BÚTORA, Z. BÚTOROVÁ, G. MESEŽNIKOV, *Slovakia’s democratic awakening*, in: J. RUPNIK, J. ZIELONKA (eds.), *The Road to the European Union. Volume I. The Czech and Slovak Republics*, Manchester University Press, Manchester/New York, 2003, pp.51-68, p.53.

50. T.G. ASH, *Zehn Jahre danach*, in: *Transit*, vol.18(1999/2000), pp.5-15.

51. M. LEŠKO, *Mečiar a mečiarizmus. Politik bez škrupúl, politika bez zábran*, VMV, Bratislava, 1996.

Continuity of Persons and Ideas?

The return to November 1989 also helped the opposition to overcome the great psychological wounds which the breakup of the VPN had caused. The formation of Mečiar's HZDS out of the rubble of the VPN did not remain without collateral damage in the form of bitter recriminations among the original actors. In principle, a return to the unity of the glorious days of the Revolution was from a personal respect appropriate for the political realities of the years 1995-1997. In the long run, not one of the 23 members of the first Coordinating Committee of the VPN, which together with the Student Committee can be considered as an organisational executive committee for regime change, joined the HZDS or the chauvinist Slovak National Party. Even more, approximately two-thirds of these members were actively engaged against Mečiar, that is to say they were involved in activities that went beyond casual commentary on the political situation.⁵² Cum grano salis one can risk the appraisal that the core of leaders of those parties which made possible the 1998 change in government through their unifying into the "Slovak Democratic Coalition" (SDK) was made up of people who already in the autumn of 1989 or even before were standing in the front ranks as so-called "small islands of positive deviance"⁵³ or Catholic activists. The change of government in 1998 was brought about not only through the concentrated efforts of the parties mentioned but also the non-state media and certain NGOs.⁵⁴ In these areas the early leading individuals of the VPN were prominently represented as well.

The radiance of the "revolutionaries" also shone on the many new faces in the opposition. Mikuláš Dzurinda, the top candidate of the united opposition parties for the 1998 election, was not standing in the front ranks during the first half of the 1990s and therefore remained untarnished by the mud fights which wore out and repelled the public. Neither did he step out into the limelight in November 1989, like Mečiar. The same was the case for the majority of the opposition candidates. Nevertheless as a matter of course in the "Memorandum" of August 30th, 1997, the founding document of the "Slovak Democratic Coalition" (SDK), one claimed the mantle of 1989 for oneself:

"We stand today at a historic crossroad. In 1989 after long decades we won freedom and democracy. In 1993 the independent Slovak Republic was formed, and today we carry out the decisive struggle about its character and its vision. There are only two possibilities: a democratic or an undemocratic state. There is no third way. [...] We will continue the national historical movement in the direction of freedom and democracy".⁵⁵

52. Partial C.V. in I. ANTALOVÁ (ed.), *Verejnosť proti násiliu*, op.cit., pp.234-252.

53. Relatively isolated circles of artists, social scientists, environmental activists. More details in S. SZOMOLÁNYI, *Kľukatá cesta*, op.cit., p.29.

54. M. BÚTORA, *OK '98: A Campaign of Slovak NGOs for Free and Fair Elections*, in: J. FORBRIG, P. DEMEŠ (eds), *Reclaiming Democracy. Civil Society and Electoral Change in Eastern Europe*, The German Marshall Fund, Washington, 2007, pp.21-52.

55. *Memorandum SDK, Martin, 30.8.1997*, printed in: *Sme*, 02.09.1997.

The HZDS and November 1989

The attitude of the HZDS towards the November events was conflict-ridden. It was a mix of half-hearted attempts at appropriation and relativisation. In comparison to July 17th, 1992 (Day of the declaration of sovereignty) or September 1st, 1992 (Day of the enactment of the constitution) November 17th, 1989 certainly did not belong to the days the party particularly strove to anchor in the collective consciousness. There are a number of reasons that can be mentioned for this. Firstly such a pursuit would have been rather hopeless, because the actors of 1989 had turned away from the HZDS in large numbers. Secondly the values which were associated with “November ’89” were really not a priority for the HZDS: None of the party’s core issues like the Slovak question or social security stood in the foreground then. Thirdly the contrast between the November euphoria and the disappointing present which the opposition so carefully brought up was unpleasant for the HZDS.⁵⁶

Mečiar personally played no role in November 1989. According to him, he was hindered, because at this time he had to bury one of his parents.⁵⁷ In any case he appeared on the political stage for the first time in January 1990, at a time when the struggle with the old regime was already decided and political engagement no longer required personal courage, as his opponents often pointed out. The two month delay pushed him into the company of the much maligned „turncoats”.⁵⁸ The HZDS controlled newspaper “Slovenská republika” made an effort to correct this in that it smuggled among dozens of photos in a large report about “November ’89” one in which Mečiar was also to be seen in action. By necessity, in contrast to all the others, this photo did not go back to 1989, but rather dated from 1991.⁵⁹

According to Mečiar the election victory of the HZDS was enough to confirm it as the “genuine” successor to the VPN. The party’s focus on national self-determination led to the need to link “November ’89” as closely as possible to the Slovak independence. Symptomatically the press spokesman of the president of the Parliament Ivan Gašparovič (HZDS) tried to show in an article “that the 17th of July 1992 – the date of the sovereignty declaration of the Slovak Republic – is the consequence of the changes that began on the 17th November 1989”.⁶⁰ After achieving independence, the HZDS – MP Viliam Hornáček advocated that the “Joyous January” (1993) be put on a par with the “Velvet November” (1989).⁶¹

However, for the HZDS “November ’89” did not really come together. The Slovak part of the transition should have been duly accentuated, the continuous Prague custodianship no less emphasised, the ex-VPN-member Mečiar should be spotlighted in

56. *Chceli sme niečo iné*, in: *Pravda*, 19.11.1997.

57. V. MEČIAR, D. PODRACKÁ, L. ŠAJDOVÁ, *Slovenské tabu*, Silentium, Bratislava, 2000, p.15.

58. J. BUNČÁK, V. HARMADYOVÁ, *Politická zmena v spoločenskej rozprave*, Veda, Bratislava, 1996, pp.132-189.

59. *Chvilé, ktoré otvorili cestu k slovenskej samostatnosti*, in: *Slovenská republika*, 17.11.1994; in addition *George Orwell v denniku Slovenská Republika*, in: *Sme*, 20.11.1994.

60. *Od 17. novembra po 17. júl*, in: *Koridor*, 20.07.1992.

61. *Právo na vlastnú cestu*, in: *Literárny týždenník*, 06.01.1995.

the right way, the VPN-leadership of November '89 on the contrary should disappear as much as possible, independence should appear as the logical result of democracy, although a majority of citizens had never spoken out for it⁶² – these were far too many heterogeneous components, so that “November '89” as a symbolic resource was finally left to the opposition, who offered a much more coherent meaning.

The Meetings in Commemoration of the “Revolution”

The return to November 1989 or as the case may be the “Revolution” intensified after the unification of the liberal and conservative opposition parties. Between 1994 and 1997 the character of the rallies on November 17th changed: they were increasingly dominated by parties and it sounded more and more like election talk. Still in 1994 the activity in remembrance of the events in 1989 was organized by the students, politicians were absent.⁶³ In the year 1995 the top representatives of the opposition parties including the representative of the Hungarian minority took part for the first time in the meetings.⁶⁴ The politicians taking part had to justify their appearance, as doubts were expressed whether the involvement of the parties would be appropriate at the event. In Bratislava between 5,000 and 10,000 people came.⁶⁵ Also in Košice a gathering was held where prominent opposition politicians spoke as well.

As cooperation among the opposition became more perceptible in 1996, the annual November demonstrations were already clearly in the hands of the parties, also in the following year. Also the Hungarian coalition used to take part, whereas the successor party to the Communist Party never participated, even though it was always invited, because they also stood in opposition to Mečiar.⁶⁶ In 1996 and 1997 gatherings were held in most of the larger localities of Slovakia such as Prievidza, Liptovský Mikuláš, Žilina, Košice and Prešov, in each case at least one or two well-known opposition personalities appeared.⁶⁷ In Bratislava in 1996 two living symbols of “Mečiarism” were also present, namely the mother of the young man presumed murdered by the secret police as well as the ex-HZDS MP who was thrown out of Parliament. They warned against a return to state terror and the mockery of rule of law.⁶⁸

The students no longer organised their meetings with the parties, instead they did so separately, with much less public participation.⁶⁹ The party demonstrations for their part clearly took on the character of an election campaign. The slogans became

62. K. HENDERSON, *Slovakia*, op.cit., pp.42-55.

63. *Študenti sa na mítingoch vyjadrili za návrat k ideálom 17. novembra 1989*, in: *Sme*, 18.11.1994.

64. *Míting k novembru '89: bude sa u nás vyučovať mečiarizmus-lexizmus?*, in: *Sme*, 17.11.1995.

65. 1st estimate: *Pravda*, 15.11.1996; 2nd estimate: *Sme*, 15.11.1996.

66. L. KOPEČEK, *Politické strany na Slovensku 1989 až 2006*, CDK, Brno, 2007, pp.182-208.

67. *Podporte myšlienky Novembra '89*, in: *Sme*, 13.11.1996.

68. *Dnes míting Zachráňme Slovensko*, in: *Sme*, 13.11.1996.

69. *Študenti majú sviatok, oslavovať niet čo*, in: *Sme*, 17.11.1997.

increasingly simple, the original intellectual elite complexion was entirely lost. When in 1995 the motto was „Let’s Save Our Culture”, by 1996 it already was „Let’s Save Slovakia” and finally in 1997, something more optimistic, „SDK – a Future for Slovakia”.⁷⁰ The gathering of 17th November 1997 with ca. 15,000 participants was probably the largest political event in Slovakia after 1990. With the help of a big screen all kinds of celebrities spoke to those present. The SDK used the opportunity to present its logo for the first time as well as a soundtrack for the election which was almost a year off.⁷¹ At the same time they tried again and again not only in the speeches but also through symbolic gestures to make a connection with the “Revolution” of 1989. For example the participants rattled their keys as in November 1989 and chanted “To je ono!” [That is it] as they did back then.⁷²

In conclusion, holding on to the remembrance of the upheaval of 1989 represented a teaser for the election campaigns of the united liberal and conservative opposition parties. Beyond this the “Ideals of 1989” served as the perfect vanishing point for a common minimal programme of the opposition: it had to do with the normative foundation of the state on individual freedom, rule of law, and a political concept based on compromise.⁷³ In order to fulfil this function “November ’89” should not have been understood as “a side show” to the all-decisive struggle in Prague, but rather as a parallel struggle with the same drama and importance. On the attempt to raise the November events to the level of a creation myth for the liberal-democratic, pro-West, “European” identity of Slovakia, there followed an (over) emphasis on the autonomy of the Slovak political scene of 1989.⁷⁴ With the identification of original Slovak roots of an independent, mature society, the representatives of the opposition, of which many had been villainized as „Czechoslovakists” at the same time showed that they not only accepted the formation of an independent Slovakia but also were ready to take it for their own in order to make the best out of it.

Concluding Remarks

In the meantime the daily political events referring to Slovak history have abated in comparison with the 1990s when the rules of the democratic process and even the meaning of the state were disputed. Today, both July 5th (“Holiday of Saints Cyril and Methodius”) and November 17th (“Day of Struggle for Freedom and Democra-

70. *Dnes míting Zachráňme Slovensko*, in: *Sme*, 13.11.1996; *Podľa rečníkov na tribúnach na Slovensku opäť vládnu tí, čo pred novembrom ’89*, in: *Sme*, 18.11.1997.

71. *Podľa rečníkov na tribúnach ...*, op.cit.

72. *Neprepadnúť apatii*, in: *Pravda*, 18.11.1997; *Asi pätnásť tisíc ľudí si včera v Bratislave pripomenulo 17. november 1989*, in: *Sme*, 18.11.1997.

73. B. BUGÁR, *Žijem v takej krajine*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 2004; P. ZAJAC, *Krajina bez sna*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 2004; M. ŠUTOVEC, *Demokratické ovzdušie a politický smog*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 2002; J. Čarnogurský, *Videné od Dunaja*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 1997.

74. As for example M. BÚTORA, *Odklinanie*, Kalligram, Bratislava, 2004.

cy”) are state holidays in the Slovak Republic. It is however difficult to speak of a successful synthesis. Most of the politicians highlight just one of the two days, depending on their party membership. The remark of former CP member and today Prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, that he cannot recall the year 1989 being a special turning-point in his life, became famous.⁷⁵ The agreement on an essential minimum of a democratic rule of law came about more quickly than a consensus about the finest hours of Slovak history, thanks also to the strong efforts of the EU.⁷⁶ Many chapters of the past, especially in the period of Communism, have not been subject to any societal debate at all. In all sorts of ways extreme conflicts can come to light. The choice of an author for the history text books of the Hungarian minority for example is a potentially explosive matter.⁷⁷ At the moment the complex Slovak-Hungarian relationship, above all when it is interpreted as a sequence of unbalanced injustices, holds the most pitfalls from which political capital can be made.⁷⁸

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75. *Som pripravený byť predsedom vlády*, Interview with Robert Fico, in: *Domino Fórum*, vol.9(2000), n.50, pp.4-5.
76. M. KNEUER, *Demokratisierung durch die EU. Süd- und Ostmitteleuropa im Vergleich*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, 2007.
77. Statement of the Hungarian’s party SMK, 04.02.2009, <http://www.smk.sk/> (retrieved 19.07.2009.).
78. Š. ŠUTAJ, *History and National Identity*, in: H. SWOBODA, J.N. WIERSMA (eds.), *Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History*, PSE/Renner-Institut, Brussels/Vienna, 2009, pp.193-204.

