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American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies
National Convention, Seattle, WA, November 1997
Session 6, Friday, 11/21/1997, 5:45 pm - 7:45 pm
Panel 8-02 The Anomalies of Slovak Electoral Politics in Central European Perspective

Elections as Opinion Polls:

A Comparison of the Voting Patterns in Post-Communist Central Europe and Slovakia

Introduction to the roundtable

Martin Votruba

Only this Monday, several prominent opposition leaders and former activists of the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia commemorated the 8th anniversary of its beginning. Ladislav Chudík, a well respected actor and Slovakia's first post-communist Minister of Culture, told some 15,000 people gathered where the mass demonstrations started in Bratislava that the way Slovakia was living now was the result of how Slovakia voted, and the way it'll vote next year will determine the way it will live in the future. In the given context, he was voicing Slovak opposition's complaints about the ruling party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS¹), often seen as personified in its leader and Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. The opposition criticizes the ruling coalition for a number of undemocratic acts and finds itself incapable of passing bills in Parliament and influencing the cabinet's policies. The West shares the opposition's concerns about Slovakia's government and turned Slovakia down for early membership in NATO.

Ladislav Chudík's words reflected the view generally held by Slovak opposition politicians and often expressed not only by the Western media, the media in its former federal partner, the Czech Republic, as well as in Slovakia, but also by Slovakia's opposition intellectuals and scholars. To put it in a nutshell, their assumption is that the current government, described by them as authoritarian or worse, is in place as a result of the preferences – in other words: authoritarian leanings – of Slovakia's population. They believe, as implied in Chudík's appeal, that a change will come only when the Slovaks change and stop voting for Mečiar.

In a broader context, such a pronounced preference for an authoritarian party, or even an authoritarian leader, would mean that today, the Slovaks are dramatically dif-

¹ Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko.

ferent from the rest of the post-communist Central Europeans. That would be surprising and would certainly warrant the question "How come?" For 900 years, the Slovaks were subjects of the Kingdom of Hungary just like the Hungarians, for a large part of that period they were ruled by the same Habsburgs like the Czechs, a destiny which they shared with the Poles in Galicia for over a century too. For hundreds of years, until the explosion of the ethnic issue, the Slovaks were treated no differently than the other ethnic groups in the Kingdom and the Empire. And after the collapse of Austria-Hungary, the Slovaks were, just like the Czechs, citizens of Czechoslovakia for 70 years.

Can then their voting preferences be explained by the fact that they experienced greater ethnic pressure from Budapest during the 19th century than the Czechs and Poles did from Vienna, or by the brief existence of a Germany-allied Slovakia during WW II? The second argument can hardly be applied – Hungary and Poland had authoritarian governments for a longer time than Czechoslovakia and later Slovakia did. The argument concerning greater ethnic pressure deserves closer scrutiny, even though – at first sight – it appears to be a matter of degree by comparison to the Czechs and Poles, rather than a situation making a profound cultural imprint that would have survived for 80 years through the present day and would have resulted in the authoritarian preferences the opposition worries about now – these differences would have to override all the influences whose majority the Slovaks shared with their present and historical neighbors.

And yet, while it appears that there are no obvious reasons to expect that the population of Slovakia should have strikingly different preferences from the population of the ex-communist part of Central Europe at large, obviously free elections in Slovakia – while it was a federal state in Czechoslovakia and then again after Slovak and Czech independence – have resulted in the rule of a party disliked not only by Slovakia's opposition [which might not be so odd, that's the opposition's job, after all], but also by the more traditional democracies in the West and by many Western scholars. It certainly contrasts with the West's view of Slovakia's neighbors, where even the return to power of the descendants of the former communist parties does not lead to the same criticism that the West directs at Slovakia's government. Critical analyses, both journalistic and well researched abound.

This panel then decided not to repeat the repeated, but to ask whether, in what way, and why is Slovakia's political situation different from its ex-communist neighbors. The starting point is to look at what has been embedded as an obvious given in many of the analyses, namely whether it's indeed true to say that the rule of this particular party in Slovakia is the result of the population's preference for such rule. The answer here is simple – it is not. While avoiding the somewhat aging question whether people have the governments they deserve, statements like "the result of the elections show that the Slovaks like Mečiar's rule," making claims about the population at large, are obviously false. In the most recent elections in 1994, 26.4% of the eligible voters, that is

to say of the adult population, voted for Mečiar. What is safe to say, after looking at the profiles of the other parties and at the turnout, is that at least 60% of Slovakia's adults either dislike Mečiar or don't favor him to the degree which would make them vote for his party. Which brings us to the next question, namely – now that we know that the preferences of Slovakia's adults don't differ dramatically from their neighbors in this respect, that is to say that there is no majority preference for authoritarian rule – “how is it possible, then, that Mečiar's party has been in power after two consecutive free elections?”

It's only the answer to this question, especially when the elections are viewed as opinion polls, i.e., as insights into the attitudes of the whole population, that shows a striking difference between Slovakia and its post-communist neighbors. This is the issue which has not been looked at and which can benefit from input at this roundtable.

[*Handout – see p. 6 below.*]

The actual parties are not identified in this table in order to highlight the difference in the voting patterns *per se*, regardless of what any of the parties in these ex-communist countries stand for. To make a more meaningful comparison between the countries, the party preferences, i.e., votes for a particular party, are recalculated as percentages of all the eligible voters in each country, not just of those who chose to vote or of the composition of the elected parliaments. For the same reason, all the elections selected for comparison here were to the lower houses of parliaments (if applicable) and in Hungary only the first round was used. For comparison's sake, too, only the parties which received 5% or more of the valid votes were tabulated.

In other words, the central table compares both the actual preferences of the adult populations at large in those countries and the theoretical composition of those countries' parliaments if Slovakia's electoral rules were applied in each of them. “Other votes” means votes for parties that would not be represented in a theoretical parliament with Slovakia's threshold rules and invalid votes (which are generally negligible, except for Slovenia where they represented about 4.5%). The column “Other votes” can, therefore, be understood as “wasted votes,” i.e., it shows the percentage of the adult population who made the effort to go to vote, but made choices that left them without representation. The dotted line in the middle of the main box arbitrarily divides parties with more than, and less than 10% of the vote – it's there merely to highlight the situation.

Slovakia is strikingly different in two respects. It has the greatest difference between the first and second largest parties – Mečiar's HZDS party is 3.3 times larger than its next competitor. And, perhaps even more significantly, the remaining votes show the greatest dispersion of all the countries. Slovakia's situation isn't different because the people prefer Mečiar's party – they don't. What's different is the substantial dispersal of the remaining votes. Those who don't vote for Mečiar's party do not lean to any detectable degree towards one alternative among the parties that campaign against Mečiar. The question then is whether there is a more profound reason for this in the sense that,

more or less, it has had to happen in Slovakia but not in the other countries, or whether it is a result of a particular set of coincidences. Two suggestions that are sometimes thrown around when discussing Slovakia can be ruled out from the start – it cannot be the result of any political apathy, because Slovakia's population has the second highest turnout in the region, which indicates at least a high level of civic awareness, but possibly a high level of concern about domestic developments. And it cannot be the result of Slovakia being a new country (a common argument used as a ready-made pseudo-explanation of all kinds of issues in Slovakia), because the same applies to Slovenia and in many respects to the Czech Republic too. This then, is the starting point for our discussion. Why, unlike in the other Central European post-communist countries and despite its free elections, Slovakia is ruled by a party that the majority of the adult population strongly oppose.

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Handout:

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Elections as Opinion Polls:

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People's Choice: *What post-Communist Central European adults elect to do on their election days*

1 st to 2 nd Party Ratio	Parties with close to and more than 5% of the valid votes (Slovakia's threshold for representation)							Other votes	No votes	Percent of all adults	Turnout		
Slovakia 3.3 : 1 (10/94)	26.4%			7.9%	7.7%	7.6%	6.5%	5.6%	4.1%	9.8%	24.3%	=99.9%	75.5%
Hungary 1.6 : 1 (5/94, 1 st)	22.7%	13.8%		8.3%	6.2%	4.8%				8.3%	31.1%	=100%	68.9%
Czech R. 1.1 : 1 (5-6/96)	22.6%	20.2%		7.9%	6.2%	6.1%	4.9%			8.5%	23.6%	=100%	76.4%
Poland 1.2 : 1 (9/97)	16.2%	13%		6.4%	3.5%	2.7%				6.1%	52.1%	=100%	47.9%
Slovenia 1.4 : 1	18.7%	13.4%	11.2%	6.7%	6.6%					17.3%	26.3%	=100.2%	73.7%
Croatia 2.5 : 1 (11/95)	31%	12.6%		7.9%	6.1%	3.4%				7.8%	31.2%	=100%	68.9%

Calculations and table: Martin Votruba, Slovak Studies Program, University of Pittsburgh, 1997.

People's Choice:

What post-Communist Central European adults elect to do on their election days

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1 st to 2 nd Party Ratio	Parties with close to and more than 5% of the valid votes (Slovakia's threshold for representation)							Other votes	Do not vote	Percent of all adults	Turnout		
Slovakia 3.3 : 1 (10/94)	26.4%			7.9%	7.7%	7.6%	6.5%	5.6%	4.1%	9.8%	24.3%	=99.9%	75.5%
	HZDS			SDL	MK	KDH	DÚ	ZRS	SNS				
Hungary 1.6 : 1 (5/94, 1 st)	22.7%	13.8%		8.3%	6.2%	4.8%	4.8%			8.3%	31.1%	=100%	68.9%
	MSzP	SzDSz		MDF	FKgP	KDNP	FIDESZ						
Czech R. 1.1 : 1 (5-6/96)	22.6%	20.2%		7.9%	6.2%	6.1%	4.9%			8.5%	23.6%	=100%	76.4%
	ODS	ČSSD		KSČM	KDU-ČSL	SPR-RSČ	ODA						
Poland 1.2 : 1 (9/97)	16.2%	13%		6.4%	3.5%	2.7%				6.1%	52.1%	=100%	47.9%
	AWS	SLD		UW	PSL	ROP							
Slovenia 1.4 : 1 (11/96)	18.7%	13.4%	11.2%	6.7%	6.6%					17.3%	26.3%	=100.2%	73.7%
	LDS	SLS	SDS	SKD	ZL								
Croatia 2.5 : 1 (10/95)	31%	12.6%		7.9%	6.1%	3.4%				7.8%	31.2%	=100%	68.9%
	HDZ	LPS/HSS		HSL	SDPH	HSP							

Slovakia: HZDS - Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko; SDL - Strana demokratickej ľavice; MK - Maďarská koalícia/Magyar Koalíció; KDH - Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie; DÚ - Demokratická únia; ZRS - Združenie robotníkov Slovenska; SNS - Slovenská národná strana.

Hungary: MSzP - Magyar Szocialista Párt; SzDSz - Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége; MDF - Magyar Demokrata Fórum; KDNP - Keresztény Demokrata Nemzeti Párt; FKgP - Független Kisgazda-, Földmunkás- és Polgári Párt; MDNP - Magyar Demokrata Néppárt; FIDESZ - Fiala Demokraták Szövetsége.

Czech R.: ODS - Občanská demokratická strana; ČSSD - Česká strana sociálnědemokratická; KSČM - Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy; KDU-ČSL - Křesťanskodemokratická unie-Československá strana lidová; SPR-RSČ - Sdružení pro republiku-Republikánská strana Československa; ODA - Občanská demokratická aliance.

Poland: AWS - Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność; SLD - Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej; UW - Unia Wolności; PSL - Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe; ROP - Ruch Odbudowy Polski.

Slovenia: LDS - Liberalna demokracija Slovenije; SLS - Slovenska ljudska stranka; SDS - Socialdemokratska stranka Slovenije; SKD - Slovenski krščanski demokrati.

Croatia: HDZ - Hrvatska demokratska zajednica; LPS/HSS - Lista pet stranaka/Hrvatska seljačka stranka; HSL - Hrvatska socijalno liberalna stranka; SDPH - Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske; HSP - Hrvatska stranka prava.