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Comments on "Culture and Politics – Rivals or Allies?"

Martin Votruba

Our discussion of the role of culture in Slovakia – as outlined in Minister of Culture Milan Kňažko's presentation – appears to involve four issues:

- The changing meaning of the word "culture" itself.
- The question of what Slovak culture has been and what it is.
- The decision of what is going to be culture for the sum total of the Slovak Republic
- What government support for culture is mandated or desirable.

I will briefly talk about what discussions each of these points will probably involve in Slovakia.

What does "culture" mean?

The scope of financial support provided by Mr. Kňažko's Ministry of Culture and the Slovak Government shows that it has moved well beyond the traditional understanding of "culture" implied in the quotation we have just heard, from Robert Musil on helping poets.¹ The Ministry of Culture has not been helping just poets and other Artists with a capital "A." Over the years, it has sponsored projects as diverse and as far away from the traditional concept of "high art" as an exhibition commemorating the extermination of Jewish Slovaks during World War II; the dissemination of research by Slovakia's astronomical observatories among the public; the Government has been contributing towards the maintenance of buildings belonging to officially sanctioned Churches; has paid for radio broadcasts in minority languages; has financed a conference of students of ethnology, film and museum studies; has provided a grant for a book on the clones of poplar trees; and has supported a course in traditional wirework.

This somewhat extensive list illustrates that the Ministry of Culture is way ahead of any substantial public discourse in Slovakia of what culture actually means today. Once such a discussion gains any strength, it will needless involve political issues – the separation or integration of Church and state, the interdependence of culture and the environment, the question whether anything attributable to an ethnic minority consti-

¹ Robert Musil, "Wie hilft man Dichtern?" *Der Tag*, 2#316, 14 Oct. 1923, p. 8.

tutes culture and therefore should be eligible for grants. If, say – this is just an example – county news broadcasts in a minority language were included under the label of the minority's cultural needs and as such eligible for sponsorship, would the same apply to local news broadcasts in an exclusively Slovak county? Or, if maintenance of minority cultures requires a higher level of sponsorship, will a higher level of sponsorship be considered appropriate for the Slovaks who happen to be a minority in predominantly Hungarian villages in southern Slovakia? The level and kind of support for Hungarian culture in Slovakia will be particularly difficult to clarify, since they certainly are a minority within the country, but at least their leaders depict their culture not as specific minority culture in Slovakia – comparable to, say, the Italian-speaking Canton of Ticino in Switzerland – but as an integral part of Hungarian culture crossing international boundaries. If so, their culture in Slovakia might be viewed as less in need of financial support, since the bearers of Hungarian culture conceived in this way are actually more than twice as numerous than the bearers of Slovak culture. While such concerns are often still waiting to be vented, the Ministry of Culture appears to have taken the prudent view that including more is preferable to excising from culture aspects of Slovakia's life that might later be found its integral parts.

What is Slovak cultural heritage?

The issue concerning culture discussed most often in Slovakia has been – what is Slovak cultural heritage, what has been Slovak culture in the past. The answers mostly boil down to folkloristic heritage and literature. One area that appears to be lacking by comparison to cultural awareness in Slovakia's neighboring countries is a sense of a history of political culture. Both the nationalists and anti-nationalists happen to agree: the history of the Slovaks is exclusively ethnic. They differ in the weight they are ready to ascribe to Great Moravia, but they agree that Slovak political history, on the whole, begins with Czecho-Slovakia,² although they are at odds about its assessment. The two most recent books on Slovak history published in the U.S., although written by authors with noticeably different perspectives, are similar in this respect: more than a half of one and almost three quarters of the other one are devoted to Slovak history since the beginning of Czecho-Slovakia.

However, for 900 years, the political history of the Kingdom of Hungary was as much the history of the Slovaks as the history of the Kingdom's subjects from its other ethnic groups: Slovak country squires voted in their counties' elections and in the Diet, Slovak villages and towns had their local governments, Slovaks were the counties' and the Kingdom's policemen and soldiers. And yet, one needs to go to books from Budapest

² The original hyphenated name of the country was dehyphenated and rehyphenated several times throughout its history. Martin Votruba, "Czecho-Slovakia or Czechoslovakia?" *Slovak Studies Program, Pitt.edu* <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/qsonhist/spellczechoslovakia.html>

and elsewhere to learn anything about the history of the political culture of the Slovaks – although they are hardly mentioned – which was theirs for 900 years and which must have shaped Slovak culture in many substantial ways. What we are getting from Slovak sources instead is a completely disproportionate focus on the past 80 years of mostly authoritarian rule. Slovaks should not be deprived of a chance to understand and accept as theirs a substantial part of their heritage that concerns civic, or political culture of the former Kingdom, nor should they be told that the recent 80 years of a succession of states and possibly a period of the same length in the 9th century is all they can claim as theirs, while the manifold heritage of 900 years of their political culture is ascribed only to others.

What is Slovak culture today?

The other half of the question about the nature of contemporary Slovak culture concerns foreign influence. While many are ready to accept influences in Slovak culture from other ethnic groups, especially if they took place in the more distant past, segments of Slovak society are no different from people in other countries in lamenting contemporary impact of foreign cultures. Yet, in a way, what they lament is indeed an ancient Central European tradition. With the exception of a handful of intellectuals in the 19th century, the majority of Slovaks and other Central European peoples have been fascinated with foreign cultures, particularly with the West, since the Middle Ages. Their religion, styles in architecture, painting, writing, social mores, and fashions have – for better or worse – almost all come from the West. The Central European intelligentsia always knew more about Western cultures than about their neighbors. Their intellectual discourse has picked up on thinkers of the West rather than around them, or even at home. This tradition is continued today – Minister Kňažko's presentation framed the issue of Slovak culture with quotations from four Western and no Slovak thinkers; few moviegoers in any of the Central European countries will have seen any of the films made by their neighbors, few will have read any of their novels, know much about their folk traditions or even history. Many ethnic activists are startled by the rapidly changing cultural landscape in their countries even more than their Western counterparts, because the collapse of communism opened the floodgates of what, with the help of barbed wires, had been kept out for decades.

If examples from other countries are anything to go by, foreign influences in contemporary Slovak culture will be argued about over and over again. It can perhaps be expected that both nationalists and anti-nationalists will reject attempts to acknowledge as part of Slovakia's cultural heritage, say, the work of Zoltán Kodály, an ethnic Hungarian composer from Galanta. But exclusionary attitudes can come from unexpected places. The Slovak Film Institute has recently decided to drop from its catalogue of Slovak films the first film from Czechoslovakia to receive an Oscar and international recognition in the 1960s – *The Shop on Main Street* – although its story takes place in Slova-

kia, its language was Slovak, the complete cast with one exception was Slovak (one actor was Polish), it was filmed on location in Slovakia, and one of its two directors was from Slovakia.³ The Slovak Film Institute's reason for not recognizing it as part of Slovak cultural heritage appears to be that the film was financed by the film studios in Prague, although in centralized communist Czechoslovakia, everyone's income actually came from Prague, were it the salaries of filmmakers in Prague, as well as in Bratislava and Gottwaldov, or the wages of collectivized farmers in the remotest village. Here too, Mr. Kňažko's Ministry of Culture has had a broader view of Slovak culture and has been ready to see as Slovak and provide grants to films whose majority sponsors were often based in foreign countries and thus would not probably pass the Film Institute's parochial gauge.

The inclination to exclude works of art from Slovak heritage on ethnic grounds diminishes with older artists and their work. While some particularly virulent anti-nationalists, rather paradoxically, argued in the mid-1990s that the Slovaks should not see as theirs an author of hymns from the 17th century Georg Tranoscius, because he came from Silesia, or Master Paul, carver of the Gothic altar in Levoča, because he was probably a local ethnic German, this appears to be a non-issue with most Slovaks, including nationalist activists. Perhaps a recognition of every national culture's multiethnic heritage will eventually shift the focus of some of those who are worried by foreign influences in contemporary Slovak culture from the technical discussion of "native vs. foreign" to a discussion of "benign vs. harmful," but, since the concepts of "national" or "ethnic" are generally embedded in people's value systems, this discussion is unlikely to disappear from Slovakia's cultural radar.

The issue that will probably cause most friction in the coming years is the need to develop aspects of culture attributable to the whole country. In the U.S. this has been called "nation building." Today's Central European discourse prefers to speak of the "creation of civic society." A sense of communality of the citizens of a country is typically contained in and conveyed by a variety of cultural images perceived as theirs by large segments of the population, regardless of their ethnic, religious, and other affiliations. Today, we still need to phrase this future development as "culture of the Slovak Republic," but a time will inevitably come, when many, in Slovakia and abroad, will call it simply "Slovak culture."

The Central European sense of culture is strongly ethnic. Current Slovak discourse, therefore, does not ponder a role for "national culture" in the sense of perceived cultural communality of all of Slovakia's citizens. The discussion in Slovakia is about the maintenance, support or development of "cultures": Slovak, Romani, Ruthenian-Rusyn, Hungarian, and others. But while people are conditioned to perceive culture ethnically, in countries like the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary and to an even more

³ Martin Votruba, "The Shop on Main Street. Obchod na korze." *Slovak Studies Program, Pitt.edu*
<http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/ssttopics/movieclips/theshoponmainstreetwriteup.html>

obvious degree in Switzerland, France and elsewhere, there is a clear sense of national culture pertinent to the country as a whole. Whether any minorities go along with it or resent it, minority cultures there are treated as aspects of one national culture. That concept of national culture may have a heavy component of the dominant ethnicity, as in France, or be mostly based on political culture, as in the rather isolated instance of Switzerland. Regardless of where between these two poles a country may be, there is no precedent of a viable Central European country without a sense of aspects of shared culture. Culture of the Slovak Republic will be moving in this direction too. It will have to overcome obstacles. Slovak nationalists will be pushing Slovak ethnic/national culture as the culture of the country. There will be a reluctance to accept ethnic minority cultures as attributes of a single culture of the country. Hungarian nationalists and Slovak self-defined anti-nationalists will insist on working towards a disjointed multicultural Slovakia without a recognition of integrated national culture.

Role of government

To sum up, recent government support of culture in Slovakia has transcended the traditional concept of "high culture," and in some instances even the broader concept of "popular culture," while public discussion of what "culture" means in contemporary society has not kept up with the recent changes. There is a general consensus on what Slovak cultural heritage is, and less of a consensus on what it is today, but these images are strongly biased towards aspects of culture perceived as directly linked to ethnicity. They lack the broader view of culture, including Slovak culture, outlined in Minister Kňažko's presentation, in the sense that they ignore much of the Slovak political, economic, and social historical experience. This is an obstacle on the way towards a more comprehensive social narrative and understanding among the Slovaks of who they are and where they have come from. Moreover, the prevalent separation of historical and contemporary cultural images along strictly ethnic lines may be counterproductive in a country with a need to develop a new perception of communality among groups, who see themselves as belonging to separate cultural and even political domains.

In this period marked by several centrifugal forces, Slovakia can benefit from an institution with a broad strategy of supporting the country's cultural integration. Minister Kňažko said in an interview in the past that he was in favor of less government control over culture, and that he might be in favor of dissolving the Ministry of Culture in the future. But he added that he did not think that now was the time. I agree that an enlightened Ministry of Culture has a useful role to play.