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AAASS National Convention, Washington, DC, November 2001  
Session 9-34, Saturday, 11/17/2001, 2:00 pm - 3:50 pm  
Panel E-11 Slovakia and Central European Security

## Martin Votruba

### **Slovakia and NATO: No Partnership for Peace with the Opposition.**

(The Central European Security Debate in Slovakia.)

Contrary to the goals of their current Government, the Slovaks have remained luke-warm towards membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at least since polls started asking about this over 7 years ago. This attitude contrasts with the Slovaks' preeminent wish to join the European Union (EU) commonly expressed by  $\frac{3}{4}$  or more of the polled people. The support for NATO membership almost reached 50% in 1994, but then dropped until it took a nose-dive after NATO's intervention in Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>1</sup> While Bratislava opened its airspace to NATO then, 75% Slovaks opposed the strike. It was the strongest opposition in Europe outside of the territory of the former Soviet Union. Tellingly, the next highest rate of opposition to the attack was among the Slovaks' former partners in the Czechoslovak Federation: 57% Czechs opposed bombing Serbia, which compared to 41% Hungarians and only 31% Poles.<sup>2</sup> After the intervention, a Slovak poll recorded the lowest number of people in favor of NATO membership since polling started – 35%.

While the number of Slovaks wishing to join NATO returned to around 40% in 2000, the bombing of Serbia had a striking impact on those who used to have no opinion earlier. Before the intervention, 26%-33% opposed NATO membership – it was always a lower percentage than of those who were in favor – and 22%-28% did not care either way. After the intervention, some of the former supporters had second thoughts and a large part of the undecided made up their minds: they did not want to join. Since then until recently – with the exception of a single poll<sup>3</sup> – more people have been against than for NATO membership. As many as 50% were against membership according to several polls, while only 11%-17% have remained undecided. To sum up, the Slovaks have been enthusiastically in favor of joining the European Union, but were first luke-

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<sup>1</sup> NATO air raids started on 24 March 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*/Reid poll, 4/1999.

<sup>3</sup> IVO, 8/2000.

warm about NATO, and after Kosovo more people were against than for joining it. In addition, the air raids left fewer people undecided.

Yet, during the same period, the Slovaks have elected governments whose foreign-policy goals with respect to NATO were, at least to some degree, at odds with the prevailing opinion. Most paradoxically, just as the government changed in 1998 and reversed the previous government's policy by making Bratislava pronouncedly pro-NATO, the population's views reversed, too – but in the opposite direction.

While in office, the previous Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar said he was interested in joining the EU and, much more vaguely, NATO, but his coalition government made little effort to achieve those goals – they went against his party's (HZDS<sup>4</sup>) and Government's disinclination to negotiate and especially compromise with the outside world. Moreover, at least one of the Government coalition partners, SNS,<sup>5</sup> declared its goal was Slovakia's neutrality. Mečiar's Government, however, had more enthusiastic opponents than supporters among the population at large,<sup>6</sup> and some of the support for NATO membership during Mečiar's premiership was certainly a gesture of defiance by the Government's opponents. Still, even the relatively high level of disapproval of the Government was not enough to achieve a comfortable majority of supporters of NATO membership. Therefore, the opposition parties and media – greatly in favor of joining – tried harder and foiled a referendum on the issue planned by the Mečiar Government, which wanted to demonstrate that it was acting in line with people's wishes if it did not pursue NATO membership. The opposition succeeded, because it persuaded enough people not to vote in the referendum, which made the turnout too low and, consequently, the referendum invalid. The opposition's efforts were greatly helped by the Government's irregularities in drafting the questions for the referendum and mishandling other related issues.

The Government of Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda elected in the fall of 1998 may have assumed that the support for NATO would only grow after it took office. If nothing else, the weeks of air raids on Serbia changed that. Even without them, any support may have remained far from overwhelming. By comparison to their neighbors, the citizens of the former Czechoslovakia had a different perception of where their nations had come from, which still makes them more likely to empathize with those seen as objects rather than agents of history. It is reflected in the relatively low support for NATO actions and participation in them among the Czechs and is even more pronounced among the Slovaks.

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<sup>4</sup> Movement for a Democratic Slovakia; Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko.

<sup>5</sup> Slovak National Party; Slovenská národná strana.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Votruba, "Elections as Opinion Polls: A Comparison of the Voting Patterns in Post-Communist Central Europe and Slovakia." Panel 8-02 The Anomalies of Slovak Electoral Politics in Central European Perspective, National Convention American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Seattle, WA, November 1997.

The way their history was taught to the Slovaks, as well as – partly – what their history actually was, made them see their lot as decided by or derived from other political entities. At least during the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy, the Slovaks were made to feel removed from the history of the Kingdom of Hungary, which was their country or province for 900 years, unless they embraced the ethnicity of the Hungarians. Budapest presented the Kingdom's past and present as the history of merely the Hungarian ethnics rather than as the history of all of its subjects. Then came the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy and creation of Czecho-Slovakia,<sup>7</sup> which was a result of WW I, of the efforts of some Slovak- and Czech-American fraternalists and of a few Slovak activists abroad, not of any large-scale domestic movement. The Slovaks' feeling of detachment from their history as subjects of the Kingdom of Hungary was greatly reinforced in Czechoslovakia in order to validate their unity with the Czechs in the new multi-ethnic country. The term *historical lands* was coined for the territories of the former Kingdom of Bohemia and Margraviate of Moravia, and the Slovaks learned that they were the Czechs' long-lost brothers, torn away from Great Moravia when it collapsed under Hungarian invasion a thousand years earlier, and now re-attached to where history would have them. The political history of the Kingdom of Hungary has hardly been taught at schools through the present. History books have mostly presented the Slovaks *vis-à-vis* the Hungarians in an adversarial manner. To simplify greatly, there appeared to be no battle the Kingdom had won that was the Slovaks' battle too, no political victory in the feudal Diet that the Slovak nobility voted for or that benefited the Slovaks as equal subjects of the Kingdom, which they were for most of its existence.

Other attitude-forming events have been in the living memory of the recent generations. Slovakia became independent and allied with Hitler's Germany in 1939, it was reunited with the Czech Republic in 1945, Dubček's drive for a more relaxed version of Communism was stopped by foreign armies in 1968, the country was separated from the Czech Republic again in 1993. That was a relatively rapid succession of events that not only changed the political set-up, but more often than not, also redrew the boundaries around them. Unlike in Poland, Germany, or Hungary, all of that happened without the level of resistance to the impending change or support for it that could have left a lasting image in the Slovaks' minds of multitudes of their compatriots acting at least in an attempt to be agents of their nation's history. Even Communism first collapsed all around their country in 1989.

Thus the Slovaks have been taught to see their history as mainly cultural, and themselves as removed from the political agents and international actions of the countries they have lived in. This is somewhat similar with the Czechs, although to a lesser

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<sup>7</sup> The original hyphenated name of the country was subsequently dehyphenated and rehyphenated several times. Martin Votruba, "Czecho-Slovakia or Czechoslovakia?" *Slovak Studies Program, Pitt.edu* <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/qsonhist/spellczechoslovakia.html>

degree due to their dominant status during the existence of Czechoslovakia. The Slovaks' reactions to NATO are indeed closest to the Czechs and both are noticeably different from Hungary and Poland. The Hungarians and Poles have a history of their armies in battles won and lost, sometimes disastrously so. But the Slovaks see their history as without battles that they would call their own. It is thus probably difficult for them to envision what battles they would want to fight on behalf of NATO and get enthusiastic about. An obvious question appears to be – how about a need to defend independent Slovakia now, how about the security that comes from the knowledge that much stronger partners would come to help it? But even the arguments of the Slovaks in favor of NATO membership show that that is not an issue for them. None of them talk about a present or future strategic danger to Slovakia in the sense that people mostly understand it, i.e., in the shape of a foreign attack.

Quite the contrary – in that sense, Slovakia is as safe as it can be. It has a 66-mile border with neutral Austria and otherwise is sandwiched among 3 NATO members who would either buffer Slovakia, or disregard its non-alignment, if such a strategic need arose during a major conflict, or, most likely, who would quickly form an alliance with Slovakia appreciated by both sides, if such an urgent need arose. Using Russia as a bogeyman works less and less, especially since its, actually the Soviet Union's, western border retreated a few hundred miles east of Slovakia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Slovakia now borders Ukraine instead. Clearly then, if NATO were the danger, Slovakia could not possibly defend itself from an attack. On the other hand, if NATO is not an enemy, and Slovakia were attacked from the east with the rest of its borders secure, it has all of its army at its disposal to defend the mere 62 miles of its Ukrainian border. Moreover, the Slovaks most likely do not expect to be the sole target of an attack from the east. If there is one neighbor a few Slovaks may harbor doubts about, it would be Hungary – but Slovakia's membership in NATO would not increase a perception of security with that segment of the population, because Hungary already is a NATO member.

This is reflected in the way NATO membership is discussed by the Government.

On the one hand, there is, so to say, logistical work. The Ministry of Defense has drawn up a plan, called *Model 2010*, to reform the Army. It has been working on the project in cooperation with the armies of the NATO countries. Minister of Defense Jozef Stank specifically mentioned the United States, which has sent all kinds of experts and, e.g., paid for a team from Cubic Defense Systems. British and French joint chiefs of staffs have provided semi-permanent advisors at the Ministry of Defense.<sup>8</sup> It's because they have professional Armies (France as of 1 August 2001) and *Model 2010* expects Slovakia to have a fully professional army by 2010.<sup>9</sup> The number of military personnel is to be reduced from about 43,000 to about 25,000, including about 19,000 soldiers.

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<sup>8</sup> Jozef Stank in a interview for RFE, 23 July 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The Slovak Army was professionalized on 1 Jan. 2006, five years after this paper was presented.

The number of fighter planes should drop from 60 to 18, tanks should go down from 270 to 52. Model 2010 also wants to increase the percentage of women in the total that includes the civilian employees from the current 4% to 10%.<sup>10</sup>

There was about a month's delay in submitting Model 2010 to the Government, but things seem to be on track. Naturally, foreign government experts are cautious about their statements on this issue, but, e.g., General Alan Stolberg from the Command of the U.S. Troops in Europe, who led an inspection team to Slovakia in August,<sup>11</sup> said that Slovakia could be proud of its progress in the military sphere in the past 1-2 years. According to him, several units were ready to join NATO right away.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. team is still working on a report about its findings.

But it is fairly obvious that the Government does not think the state of the Army is too poor to be a barrier to NATO admission, nor that its greater preparedness might increase Slovakia's chances to be invited to join. The State Secretary at the Ministry of Defense Rastislav Káčer said in September that the military had not met a single of NATO's 64 "partnership goals." He did not think it was a problem, though, because the tasks were to be completed between 2001 and 2006, that is up to 4 years after the Prague NATO summit scheduled to decide whether Slovakia and 6 other countries ought to be invited to join.<sup>13</sup> He also complained that the budget for the military was 1.8% of Slovakia's GDP, while it would need 4%-5% to secure Slovakia's defense.<sup>14</sup>

Neither the Government, nor the politicians and commentators who speak in favor of joining NATO focus on Slovakia's security as their major concern. If they occasionally do so, they use phrases like "global concerns," make general statements about a small country's need to have military alliances, and sometimes admit implicitly that NATO membership might not increase Slovakia's security when they suggest that it would not be fair for Slovakia to be secure thanks to NATO without paying its dues by being a member. Skirting around logistics, the discourse concerning membership in a military alliance has little to do with a specific need for the country's actual security and defense of its borders.

The Government, politicians, and commentators want to join NATO for symbolic and economic reasons and under the assumption that NATO will maintain democracy in the country. The symbolic arguments speak of a need to be part of the community of democratic nations, to draw a line after the communist past, to belong formally where, in their view, Slovakia is destined to be by its history and geographic location.

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<sup>10</sup> "Pripravované zmeny v armáde." *Sme*, 16 Oct. 2001.

<sup>11</sup> "Američania zbierali informácie o našej armáde." *Sme*, 24 Aug. 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Slovakia joined NATO on 29 March 2004, three years after this paper was presented. Popular support for NATO membership had grown to about a half of the population by the late 2000s, opposition to it dropped to about one-fifth., the support for and opposition to Slovakia's participation in NATO's military missions abroad was divided more evenly with over 40% in each group.

<sup>13</sup> 20-22 Nov. 2002, Slovakia was invited.

<sup>14</sup> "SR zatiaľ nespĺnila cieľ pre NATO." *Pravda*, 19 Sept. 2001.

Pro-NATO activists expect the Alliance to apply similar criteria, not strategic concerns. František Šebej, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for European Integration, said the first question NATO will ask would be “Are they [i.e. Slovakia] like we [i.e. the West] are?” i.e., “Are they like us? – Sú ako my?”<sup>15</sup> He explained that the question concerned common values. Those who are against membership are accused of wanting just the opposite – to reject democracy; to leave Slovakia open to “the East.”

However, not everyone is welcome among the supporters of NATO membership in Slovakia. In the spring, Vladimír Mečiar angered the pro-NATO activists by declaring formally that the goal of his opposition HZDS party was to join NATO, too. In August HZDS issued a *Memorandum* calling on all the political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as on the public to work together toward Slovakia’s membership, both in NATO and the European Union. The *Memorandum* argued that such an agreement might be particularly useful in view of the elections scheduled for the fall next year. The West would see that no matter who forms the next government, it would be pro-NATO, i.e., pro-Western. Interestingly, the HZDS *Memorandum* avoided the symbolic arguments about a need to join commonly put forward by the opponents of HZDS. It listed security concerns, and in line with Mečiar’s campaigning skills, it picked out the most specific issues with a direct appeal to the population that can be found in the Army’s Model 2010. Membership in NATO, the *Memorandum* says, is “a unique chance to overcome new dangers and risks, namely organized crime, terrorism, and illegal migration.”<sup>16</sup> Shortly after issuing the *Memorandum*, HZDS said it was lobbying the U.S. Congress. Júlia Ondrejčeková-Sellersová, formerly a Washington, DC, contributor to the HZDS newspaper *Slovenská republika* and a voiceful critic of NATO’s, as she described it, aggression in Kosovo, was reported to have sent Congressmen letters urging them to support Slovakia’s membership. Apparently, she found them supportive.<sup>17</sup> HZDS also announced that in December, it was organizing an international conference on Slovakia’s integration in NATO. President Rudolf Schuster accepted the request to host the conference.<sup>18</sup>

While Mečiar is criticized by pro-NATO activists, who say that he “does not really mean it,” or that he is doing it to “legitimize” his party, and suspected of the same abroad, e.g., by the outgoing British Ambassador to Slovakia David Lyscom,<sup>19</sup> the HZDS *Memorandum* means that, at least formally, Slovakia now has only one small party, SNS, that is opposed to NATO membership. According to a recent poll,<sup>20</sup> SNS was fa-

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<sup>15</sup> TASR “Šebej: Odpoveď na kontrolné otázky, či pozvať SR do NATO, môže znieť nie.” *Sme*, 21 Aug. 2001.

<sup>16</sup> “Memorandum o integrácii Slovenskej republiky do NATO a Európskej únie.” Issued by HZDS. SITA 27 July 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Marián Leško, “Emisárka HZDS objavila Ameriku.” *Sme*, 10 Aug. 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Attila Lovász: “V slovenskej politike sa začal proces legitimizácie HZDS.” RFE, 7 Nov. 2001.

<sup>19</sup> “Lyscom: Uďiali sa zásadné zmeny.” *Sme*, 7 Nov. 2001.

<sup>20</sup> MVK 9/2001.

vored by only about 5% of Slovakia's adult population. The Chairman of the SNS Club for Defense and Security Pavol Hrivík said that his party now supported Slovakia's participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace, because neutral Finland and Switzerland do so too, but he denied reports that quoted him as saying that SNS was abandoning its program of Slovakia's neutrality.<sup>21</sup> SNS has split into two parties since then.

The one party that says it supports NATO membership, but is criticized for it by the Government as well as by the opposition HZDS, is the new and relatively popular Smer ("Direction") chaired by Róbert Fico. He is accused by both sides that instead of declaring unconditional support for NATO membership, he undermines Slovakia's chances by telling the Slovaks that his party is for a negotiated entry that would bring them tangible advantages. In turn, Fico says the ruling parties use NATO membership to rally support for next year's elections by posing as the only parties whose government is acceptable to the West. As to HZDS, Fico agrees with the Government that by supporting NATO membership, Mečiar is hoping to whitewash his image of the person who caused that Slovakia was not accepted along with its neighbors in the previous round of NATO enlargement in Europe.

For a long time, the current Government coalition parties seemed puzzled or embarrassed by the low support for and high opposition to NATO membership among the population. When they were in opposition, they criticized Prime Minister Mečiar that his qualms about NATO membership were contrary to what a plurality of the voters wanted. In August 2001, the Government earmarked 9 million crowns for a campaign to persuade people to support NATO membership.<sup>22</sup> The sum was not used for advertising, it was paid to the government-sponsored TV and radio stations, as well as to the independent media and NGOs, which accepted it in return for promoting the Government's program in their reporting, on their editorial pages, and in other creative ways. One NGO, the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, signed a memorandum with the Ministry of Defense on cooperation in achieving Slovakia's membership in NATO.<sup>23</sup>

In less than 2 months, a poll found out that 53% respondents supported NATO.<sup>24</sup> But by that time, the government-sponsored promotion by the media had hardly taken off. Moreover, the support started growing before the campaign. A July poll recorded identical support – 53%, an 8%-increase on previous year.<sup>25</sup> According to President Schuster,<sup>26</sup> the Government coalition should realize that the increase took place thanks to Mečiar, because some of the voters of HZDS have changed their minds after their

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<sup>21</sup> SITA: "SNS: Opúšťa myšlienku neutrality, ZVS chce skrátiť na 3 mesiace." quoted by SITA, 20 Aug. 2001, from *Práca*, 20 Aug. 2001, "Vzdávame sa myšlienky neutrality a prechádzame k názoru, že pre SR bude najlepšia aktívna účasť v celoeurópskom bezpečnostnom systéme."

<sup>22</sup> Patrícia Ďurišková: "Na propagáciu NATO dostanú televízie deväť miliónov." *Pravda*, 28 July 2001.

<sup>23</sup> SITA: "SFPA: Podpísala memorandum o spolupráci s Ministerstvom obrany SR." 20 July 2001.

<sup>24</sup> "Podpora na vstup do NATO a EÚ rastie." *Sme*, 23 Oct. 2001.

<sup>25</sup> SITA: "MVK: Za vstup do Severoatlantickej aliancie 52.5% obyvateľov." 26 July 2001.

<sup>26</sup> "Schuster nesúhlasí s kritikou Mečiara." *Pravda*, 15 Oct. 2001.

party included NATO membership in its program in the spring. HZDS is currently supported by about 20% of the adult population,<sup>27</sup> and over 60% of its voters used to be against NATO in the past.<sup>28</sup>

It seems that however the media and NGOs decide to promote NATO membership, they will be hard-pressed to find the arguments people want to hear, and that the battle will not be about defense. Commentators agree that on the whole, the Slovaks do not care. And those who do, tend to ask questions the promoters of NATO membership may find difficult to answer truthfully and meet the Government's expectations. During a series of interviews with students, pollsters have learned that the students will mistrust politicians extolling the advantages of NATO.<sup>29</sup> They want to hear from independent experts. Government sponsorship may secure experts with pro-NATO views, but the students also said they wanted answers to specific questions. For example, "Has anything changed in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary [since they joined NATO]?" "Will my life change, and how, if we join?" Government Foreign Policy Adviser Miroslav Wlachovský advised that people who find the issue of too abstract should be told that, for example, NATO membership will give their children a chance to have a good standard of living.<sup>30</sup>

It is quite possible that, as in the past, public opinion will be swayed by other developments than the Government's policies. For example, enough Slovaks were shocked by the September attacks in New York and Washington that 59% said a week later that they approved of Bratislava's decision to offer Slovakia's participation in the campaign against terrorism.<sup>31</sup> It is also quite possible that, as in the Slovaks' historical experience, their opinion on the matter will play little role in whether their country is invited to join NATO a year from now.

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<sup>27</sup> MVK, 9/2001.

<sup>28</sup> IVO, 5/2000.

<sup>29</sup> Oľga Gyarfášová, "Ako na to NATO?" *Mosty*, 14 Aug. 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Kveta Fajčíková, "Presvedčiť babku o výhodách NATO nie je jednoduché." *Sme*, 7 Nov. 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Oľga Gyarfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov and Marian Velšic, "An Overwhelming Majority of Slovaks Condemns the Terrorist Attacks against the U.S." IVO, 21 Sept. 2001.