

THE FIRST ATTEMPT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC FOR REGIONALIZATION, OR THE ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM OF 1996

László Gulyás

University of Szeged, Faculty of Engineering

1. INTRODUCTION

Communism in Czechoslovakia came to an end with the 'velvet revolution' of 1989 and the communist party-dominated regime collapsed within days, a situation, which meant that the changing of the political system could immediately take momentum. In the meantime the relationship between the Czech and the Slovak inhabitants of the country was worsening and this situation eventually led to the disintegration of the state itself; on January 1, 1993 the states of the Czech and the Slovak Republics came into being. Our research is aimed at investigating the first administrative reform of the Slovak Republic, ratified on July 24, 1996 (221/1996), inclusive of the phenomena that had preceded it. During our research a special emphasis was laid on introducing the issue of how the Hungarian minorities living in Slovakia were affected and discriminated by the reform.

2. THE CZECHOSLOVAK HERITAGE 1968-1992

In the communist era state and local governments did not exist separately; the communist party exercised power through the institution of the National Front. It was also the National Front that nominated representatives who were then eligible for being elected and, following the formal elections they were the ones who eventually had to carry out the orders of the communist party.

Map 1. Areas and districts in Slovakia 1968-1991



Source: Petrőcz, 1998, p.112.

From 1969-1990 three administrative levels existed in Slovakia. (See Map 1) The top level was the area level and there were four of those in the country. The middle level was the district level and there were 38 of those. On bottom level there were the 2700 settlements.

The communist party set up the so-called National Council in each area, each district and settlement and exercised power through them. The system of national councils ceased to exist in 1990 under the proposition of the Czech and Slovak National Councils. Under the new laws (369/1990 and 472/1990) the administrative system of Slovakia was fully transformed. (Petrőcz 1998)

Law 369/1990 eliminated the national committees and separated state- and local-level administration. State administrative tasks were delegated to district level, while the individual settlements were legally administered by local governments. This is a dual model, in which state administrative tasks are performed by districts, while the settlements acquire local administrative roles. (Józsa, 2004)

Law 472/1990 abolished the level of districts within state administration, while it left the 38 zones intact and within each of them 2-4 smaller administrative units were organized. As a result, a total of 121 administrative zones came into being. The administrative spheres of authority were divided among regional offices, preferably in such a way that citizens could do their official business as close to their place of residence as possible. (Petrőcz 1998) According to specialists it was due to these two laws that the Slovak administrative system of the era approached western European norms. (Petrőcz 1998)

At the same time the question of further reforms was also raised. A parliamentary committee, commissioned by Jan Carnogursky, the Slovak prime minister from April 1991-June 1992, proposed continued administrative reforms in May 1992. According to that proposal, in the Slovak part of former Czechoslovakia 16 counties were to be established, and, within them the establishment of 77 smaller districts was proposed. Historical traditions, geographical conditions and economic as well as social needs were to be taken into consideration when reorganizing the country's administrative units. It was also decided that the administrative units were to have approximately the same number of inhabitants. In addition, the counties were to have been governed by elected local governments. (Mezei 2004)

The committee's proposal was not put to debate, because prime minister Jan Carnogursky, who emphasised the role of counties in his administrative policy, was soon to leave the political scene and he was followed by Vladimir Meciar in June 1992. (Kovac 1996) During the second Meciar government (the first Meciar government ruled from June 1990-April 1991) the issue of the formation of the county system was removed from the agenda. At the same time Meciar contributed to the sharpening of the debates in relation to the afterlife of the Czechoslovak state, and as a result of his political views, the conflict between Czechs and Slovaks became the centre of home politics. This conflict remained unsolved and this situation eventually resulted in the breaking up of the Czechoslovak state. (Hamberger 1997, Gulyás 2005).

3. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MECIAR ERA (1992-1998)

The Slovak Republic, which became independent on January 1, 1993, was defined by the constitution of the country as a Slovak state, despite the fact that a considerable number of minorities –about 15% –lived within the country. (See Table 1). The period from 1993 to 1998 was defined by the increasingly dominant Slovak nationalism (Gulyás 2005). This political trend was most characteristically represented by the figure of Vladimir Meciar, who, during the investigated period, functioned as the country's prime minister on two occasions. Considering the dates, from June 24, 1992 - March 11, 1994 was the period of

the second Meciar government, then from March 15, 1994 – October 1, 1994 was the period of the government of Josef Moravčík, and eventually, October 1, 1994 – October 10, 1998 was the period of the third Meciar government.

As it can be concluded from the above dates, the new government led by Josef Moravčík proved to be short-lived, thus, except for a brief period of four and a half months, it was practically Vladimir Meciar who was the country's prime minister for a six-year period, from 1992 through 1998. The most characteristic feature of that period was that Meciar and his party – especially during his third term- in addition to political key positions, also dominated the media, and during this period the electronic media actually functioned as the mouthpiece of the government. Meciar also tried to control the country's economy, especially privatization processes. (Kovac, 1996, Lesko, 1998) In these attempts the democratic rights were often abused and it was also the period of several unlawful acts. The most scandalous of these was that the secret service kidnapped the son of the president, that person's, who functioned as counterbalance to Meciar in political life (August 1995). In addition the two investigators of the case were also removed from their jobs, and eventually a person, related to the crown witness was murdered, too. The European Union and the United States attempted at warning Meciar in a diplomatic way, but neither of these attempts brought any result of significance. Due to these characteristics the early Meciar era can be evaluated as a negative period in the history of the young Slovak state. Slovakia's domestic politics and the country's economic development were very different from the political practices of the other three countries of the 'Visegrád Four'. As a result, in 1999 Slovakia was not considered for NATO membership during the first round of NATO enlargement. The situation was the same with EU membership, since by 1998 Slovakia was excluded from the group of candidate countries, too. (Boross 2000/a)

Table 1.
Ethnic breakdown in Slovakia, based on 1991 census figures

Nationality/ethnicity	number	%
Slovak	4,606,125	85.7%
Hungarian	578,408	10.8%
Czech	65,216	1.1%
Ruthenian-Ukrainian	38,979	0.7%
Romany	80,627	1.6%
Other	1,163	0.03
Total	5,289,608	100.00%

Source: Kovac, 1996. pp. 1312-313.

In the Meciar era serious problems emerged in the relationship between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. The Meciar governments radically cut the state funding of minority cultures and many people, who considered themselves Hungarian, were dismissed from their jobs in the government sector and, in addition, renewed attacks were carried out by the government against minority education. (Boross 2000/B) In addition, using the new legislation related to the use of Slovak as the only state language, the official use of Hungarian was made impossible in administration. Since this problem is very complicated, a paper of this length cannot fully explore the complexity of the language problem; instead, as it was stated in the title, those steps taken by the Meciar

government will be examined, which had a disadvantageous impact on the Hungarian population.

4. THE MECIAR GOVERNMENTS AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

4.1. The draft of 1993

Meciar recognized those political opportunities which lay in the restructuring of the country's administrative system. He tried to change Slovakia's administrative system in order to be able to grant key positions to his own party. This attempt can very well be seen in the fact that he replaced law 472/1990 with 487/1992. (Petőcz 1998) While under law 472/1990, ratified by the Czechoslovak state, the administrative leader of any district had been elected by the mayors of the settlements of the given district, Meciar's law of 487/1992 modified it and said that the administrative leader is appointed by the leader of the area. In which the district lies. Since the leaders of the individual areas were appointed by the government itself, by modifying the former law, the government acquired the right to appoint the regional administrators in all 121 administrative districts. It is also obvious that the second Meciar government filled all these positions with its own people. Meciar also intended to use the restructuring of the administrative system as a weapon against the Hungarian minority. At the end of 1993 the second Meciar government prepared the concept of the division of the country into 7 administrative regions. (See Map 2)

Map 2. The proposal of the 2nd Meciar government for Slovakia's regional division



Source: Petőcz, 1998 page 118.

Seven regions were proposed by Meciar and there were Hungarian minorities in five of those. There was no Hungarian community of considerable size in the area of Žilina (Zsolna) and Prešov (Eperjes). The number and proportion of ethnic Hungarians is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The number and proportion of ethnic Hungarians in the proposed regions of 1993

Name of the region	Total population number	Number of Hungarians	Proportion of Hungarians
Bratislava	588,059	30,083	5.12%
Trnava	810,538	157,919	19.48%
Nitra	893,448	196,149	21.95%
Zvolen	634,343	84,682	13.35%
Kosice	836,004	96,343	11.52%

Source: Petőcz, 1998. p. 119.

In order to interpret the table it is important to consider that according to the language law of 1990, as well as the 1994 law regulating the use of sign boards, 20% is the limit in any settlement for practicing minority rights. It means, that in a given settlement, if the number of ethnic population exceeds 20%, those who belong to the minority can use their own language in local administration and they can use bilingual sign boards within the limits of the settlement. From the table it is evident that Meciar's intention was to keep the number of ethnic Hungarians below 20% in the proposed regions, thus in four of those, except for the Nitra region, they would not have been able to exercise their rights. (Petőcz, 1998) During the second Meciar government, due to its own political instability - inner conflicts leading to resignation were common in the government party faction -, and also owing to the protest of the Hungarian minority, the draft bill of 1993 did not pass.

4.2. The administrative reform of 1996

Meciar's third government, which came into office in October 1994 (Boross, 2000/c) put the problem of administrative reform on the agenda again. This step caused the relationship between the government and the Hungarian minority change from bad to worse. Two issues need to be considered in this respect. The first is, that although the third Meciar government signed an agreement of cordiality with Hungary in March 1995, a document, which is called the Slovak-Hungarian Charter, they did not even make an attempt at keeping it; they treated the Hungarian minority with hostility. (Boross 2000/d) The 1995 law on language rights purposely discriminated against ethnic Hungarians. At the same time the Hungarian minority of Slovakia elaborated a different version of the administrative reform, which suited their interests better. (Szarka 2001) There is no opportunity to describe the Hungarian version in details within the framework of this paper, but the most significant characteristics of it will be given below

According to the resolution of the general assembly of Komarno of January 6, 1994, a unified 'Hungarian' region be established in those areas of southern Slovakia, in which the Hungarians constitute the majority. The Party of Hungarian Coalition developed the idea further and submitted the new version in the 1996 parliamentary debates of the administrative reform. At the same time the draft proposal of the Union of Towns was also being elaborated, a proposal, aimed at creating 16 counties and 78 districts within them. (Petőcz, 1998) On the other hand the third Meciar government also submitted a draft proposal, according to which Slovakia was to be divided into 8 regions and 79 districts. In the parliamentary debates the faction of the government party turned down both proposals,

the one by the Hungarian Coalition Party and by the Union of Towns as well. The president - because of the special status of Bratislava - returned the proposal to the parliament for a new debate. Following a lengthy debate the parliament eventually approved it with amendments on July 7, 1996.

Meciar intended to strengthen his own political power by establishing the 8 administrative regions in a way that he 'rewarded' those regions, in which his party had won (e.g. the Trenčín region) and 'punished' those (the Prešov and Banská Bystrica regions for example), where his party had lost.

Map 3. The regional division of Slovakia. 1996.



Jelmagyarázat: 1 – Országhatár; 2 – Kerületi határ; 3 – Járáshatár; 4 – Kerületi székhely.

Legend: country border; district border; zone border; district centre

Source: Horváth 2004. p. 428.

The next question to be examined was what changes the administrative reform held for the Hungarian minority. When drawing the region's borders the Meciar government abused the principle of ethnicity on several occasions. Two facts are of major significance in this respect. One is that the Csallóköz region, populated by Hungarians, was divided into two parts and it was shared between the Trnava and the Nitra regions. It meant that the Slovak government deliberately fragmented those areas, which were homogeneously inhabited by Hungarians. By doing so the Slovak government abused a basic international principle, according to which governments should refrain from changing the ethnic proportion of inhabitants living in multiethnic areas. On the other hand in mixed-population regions it was the Slovak towns situated above the Hungarian language border which were designated as regional centres. For example in the Banská Bystrica region it was the town of Banská Bystrica in the north that acquired the leading role, as opposed to the Hungarian towns of Rimaszombat (Rimavská Sobota) or Losonc (Lučenec) in the south. In the Trnava and Nitra regions the regional centres were also located in the far north, and it meant that the Hungarian inhabitants of the southern areas had to travel great distances to attend to their business in the offices of the regional centre.

If the administrative reform of 1996 is examined from the point of view of the individual districts - for details see research by Kálmán Petőcz (Petőcz 1998) - the conclusion can be drawn that the intention was to put the Hungarian minority in a disadvantageous position. Two facts are of special significance in this respect. One is that the area as well as the number of inhabitants is bigger in the southern districts, which are inhabited by Hungarians, than in the northern ones, populated by Slovaks. It means that when developmental funds are distributed by districts, the proportionately larger and more populous southern districts get less. The second important fact is that when designating

towns to become district centres, the towns with Slovak majority became district centres in larger numbers than the Hungarian towns. Out of a total of 15 towns with Hungarians in majority, it was only two that did become district centres.

In summary it can be stated that the Meciar administrative reform of 1996 meant a definite disadvantage for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, both on regional and also on district level.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Boross Ferenc (2000/a): A NATO- és EU-tagság és a kisebbségi kérdés. Id.mű: Boross Ferenc (2000): Szomszédunk Szlovákia. Kalligram. Pozsony. p. 93-101.
2. Boross Ferenc (2000/b): A szlovák kormány nemzetiségi politikája a szlovákiai magyar oktatás és kultúra támogatásának s állami dotációjának kontextusában. Id.mű: Boross Ferenc (2000): Szomszédunk Szlovákia. Kalligram. Pozsony. p. 102-151.
3. Boross Ferenc (2000/c): A Meciar-kormány hatalmon maradásának esélyei és a változás lehetőségei. Id.mű: Boross Ferenc (2000): Szomszédunk Szlovákia. Kalligram. Pozsony. p. 60-78.
4. Boross Ferenc (2000/d): A szlovákiai magyar kisebbség helyzetének alakulása a magyar-szlovák alapszerződés aláírása után. Id.mű: Boross Ferenc (2000): Szomszédunk Szlovákia. Kalligram. Pozsony. p. 79-92.
5. Gulyás László (2005): Két régió – Felvidék és Vajdaság – sorsa az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchiától napjainkig. Hazai Térségfejlesztő Rt. Budapest.
6. Hamberger Judit (1997): Csehszlovákia szétválása. Teleki László Alapítvány. Budapest.
7. Józsa Zoltán (2004): Változatok regionalizációra: a lengyel, a szlovák és a cseh modell. A Pólay Elemér Alapítvány Tansegédletei. Szeged.
8. Dusan Kovac (1996): Szlovákia története. Kalligram. Pozsony.
9. Marián Lesko (1998): Meciar és a mecarizmus. Balassi-Kalligram. Budapest-Pozsony.
10. Mezei István (2004): A közigazgatás intézményrendszere. Id. mű Horváth Gyula (szerk.): Dél-Szlovákia. A Kárpát-medence régiói, 2. Budapest-Pécs, Dialóg Campus Kiadó-MTA Regionális Kutatások Központja. 2004. 425-445. old.
11. Petőcz Kálmán (1998): Választások és felosztások. Lilium Aurum. Dunaszerdahely.
12. Szarka László (2001): Közigazgatási reform és területi kérdés. Kisebbségkutatás. 2001/1-es szám.