

Slovak-Hungarian relations : past, present and future

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Let me start with a few theses which, though presented from the Slovak point of view, could be, I hope, accepted as a starting point in the search for a new meaning in our mutual relationship.

Great Moravia of the 9th Century is regarded by Slovaks as the primary source of their culture and civilisation, as their — so to say — privileged season of grace. Though practically all Slavs look upon Great Moravia, and in particular the sainted Greek brothers Cyril and Methodius, as their own source of culture and Christianisation, the Slovaks rightfully claim the privilege of being the direct heirs of Great Moravia. In the same cultural, historical and territorial sense as Italians, from among all Latin nations, have the right to consider themselves the direct heirs of the Roman civilisation.

After its collapse in 907, one part of Great Moravia came under Czech rule. Its inhabitants, absorbed by their Slav neighbours, never again claimed a culturally — not to mention politically — independent and self-contained identity. Today they are known as the Moravians, a part of the Czech nation.

The eastern part of Great Moravians, known also as Slovieni, ended under Hungarian domination and whatever can be said about their fate during the following 900 years, at the end they were able to reclaim their culturally and later also politically independent and self-contained identity. Today they constitute the Slovak nation. Our ancestors were not as 'soluble' culturally and linguistically, in the non-Slav Hungarian millieu, as were Moravians in the Czech surroundings. Despite of all the sad things that happened in the 19th century, if it were not for Hungary, the defeated in 907 Slovieni would have ended absorbed by the Czechs — or perhaps Poles — like their Moravian twin brothers. Luckily for the preservation of Slovak identity, the 19th century panslavs and then Masaryk — incidentally a Moravian — came with their idea of an ethnically indivisible "Czechoslovak

nation" too late. More precisely, 900 and 1000 years too late.

Though the Hungarian context did not allow the Slovaks an authentic participation in history comparable with that of their two Slav neighbours, the Czechs and Poles, the "ethnoprotective" nature of Latin speaking Hungary until 1790, did allow the Slovak element to survive — perhaps hibernate is a better term — for 800 years. This is one fact.

Another fact is that were it not for the dissolution of Greater Hungary after World War I, the 120 years that followed, (after 1790 and notably after the Ausgleich of 1867), would have undone all that past "ethnoprojection". In this sense the vast majority of Slovaks consider the creation of CzechoSlovakia in 1918 as highly beneficiary to their national survival. Despite the fact, that soon they had to protect their identity again. This time it was not a Magyar-centred but Czecho-centred state in which Slovaks were to become again mere tennants, not only politically but also culturally.

These are the *complementary rôles* that Hungarians and Czechs have played in both the preservation of the Slovak ethnic and national identity, as well as in attempts to destroy it, to assimilate it. But the fact remains, that Hungarians became our historical neighbours, whereas Czechs are our closest ethnic neighbours.

My personal opinion is that part of the meaning of Slovak history lies in *an explicit awareness of this complementarity* : we were helped by both these neighbours, but also our very existence was threatened by both of them. We have learned from living with both the Hungarians as well as the Czechs. And maybe also both the Hungarians as well as Czechs have learned, or *will learn*, from living, or having lived, with us.

There is a peculiar similarity between the Hungarian and Czech lack of separate words for their homeland proper, and the

whole country which they dominate or dominated :

The Hungarian language cannot distinguish between the name of Hungary proper, the carrier of its cultural and ethnic identity, and Hungary as a political territory (that I referred to above as Greater Hungary). In Slovak the first is called 'Maďarsko', the second 'Uhorsko' : A 19th century Slovak referred to himself as living in 'Uhorsko', never 'Maďarsko', and he was loyal to the former. Kossúth fought for the reduction of 'Uhorsko' to 'Maďarsko' and eventually contributed to the dissolution of 'Uhorsko' seventy years later. Similarly the Czechs : there is a word for Czecho-Slovakia, and a word for Slovakia. But Czechia or Czech Lands are terms seldom used and still sound awkward. Until recently, the same was true about their Czech equivalent 'Česko'.

I think this brings us to the core of contemporary misunderstandings when dealing with the problem of Slovak-Hungarian relations: the distinction between what the Slovaks call 'národ', a culturally and linguistically (not necessarily politically) self-contained and independent ethnicum, and what corresponds to the common English usage of the word 'nation' as the set of citizens of a given political country.

By the way, the confusion between the political and cultural meaning of the term 'nation' plagues Slovak-Czech relations as well. For instance, practically no ethnic organisation in the Anglo-Saxon world carries the name 'Czech' — they all masquerade with the adjective 'Czechoslovak'.

It is true that the Slovak reasons for insisting on the ethno-cultural meaning of the word 'nation' are perhaps socio-psychological more than anything else: Irrespective of their historical disadvantage, this puts the Slovaks formally on an equal footing with their neighbours when speculating — and remember, we cannot afford to do more than speculate — about future arrangements in Central Europe: There was never a Slovak kingdom, and it is certainly too late for that now. It is also too late to think of a fragmentation of Central Europe into ethnically almost homogeneous (you would still have the problem of minorities) tiny nation-states. But it is not too late for the Slovaks, having reached an independent cultural nationhood, to aspire to a *relative political nationhood* : to enter a Central European Federation or Confederation as politically equal partners of Hungarians,

Czechs, and others. Not as 'the younger brothers' within a 'Czechoslovak Federation' or within a resurrected (under whatever name) 'Greater Hungary', but as equals.

What should be the structure of such a Central European Confederation ? First I should explain why I prefer the term 'confederation' to that of 'federation' : It seems to me that the next step in Slovak political emancipation should be a transformation of CzechoSlovakia into a Confederation, perhaps along the Austro-Hungarian Ausgleich of 1867. At present, this is, of course, purely illusory. If for no other reasons, the Soviets are not willing to allow the Czechs that much independence from the mainland of states that border with the Soviet Union. But sooner or later the Czechs will have to realise that it is in their own national interest to have the Slovaks enter with them into a wider Europe, or Central Europe, as their partners and allies, and not as a political appendix full of explicit or suppressed resentments and animosities. Retrospectively, this could also be applied to Slovak-Hungarian relations.

Before I continue, let me point out one fundamental difference between the Slovak and Hungarian 'historical and existential anxiety' with which they will approach any future model of Central Europe :

The Hungarians, as much as they have suffered throughout their history, at least during the last two centuries were never under any threat of completely disappearing, of losing their very identity. Their losses were quantitative : diminution of power and influence, loss of territory and population, persecution and dehungarianisation of the *part* of their population that after 1918 ended up under foreign rule.

The Slovaks, on the other hand, had to face a real danger of completely losing their identity two times during this and the last centuries : as victims of cultural magyarisation between 1867 — 1918, and subsequently as biological fodder for the new 'Czechoslovak nation' . Deslovakisation in both cases did not threaten a part of the nation, but the *whole* nation as such. The quantitative loss in 1939, namely the secession of part of their territory as a consequence of the Vienna arbitration, was regarded by many Slovaks as a lesser evil compared to the danger of losing their very

national existence. You do not wish to have your limb amputated, but you prefer that loss to the loss of your life.

Let me add here something else. A typical manifestation of the confusion between nation and state, between Hungary as an ethnically determined cultural entity, and Hungary as a politically determined territory, is the way in which they perceive Trianon :

One thing is the loss of genuinely Hungarian population to the successor states. I think on this level Hungarians can expect sympathy from the rest of the world, though I cannot see any undoing of that. And of course, there is always the argument that a couple of decades ago the boot was on the other foot.

Quite a different feature of Trianon is the political dismemberment of Greater Hungary. As much as we think today that a transformation of Austria-Hungary would have been preferable to its annihilation, I think the Austrian and Hungarian representatives of that time carry most of the blame for the fact that this 'Colonial Imperium' could not be turned into a 'Commonwealth of Nations'. Because of that, today we have to start from scratch.

One of the sad consequences of this confusion is that even today too many a Slovak still perceives Hungary more politically than culturally, more as a threat than as a partner or even ally. And reacts accordingly. I think this is unfortunate, and a lot of effort is needed *on both sides* to remedy this situation. Otherwise our future again will be decided by others, not by Hungarians, and certainly not by Slovaks.

If this is accepted, I would add my own vision of a Confederation of semi-independent national states, perhaps as far as from the Baltic to the Adriatic. A Confederation to which each individual will relate on two, non-interfering levels or layers : through his/her membership of one of the (non-territorially determined) ethnic nations, and through his/her citizenship of one of the territorially determined states. Each such national state would provide two governing bodies, corresponding to the two layers : One consisting of representatives of all the people living on the territory of the state — this would concern itself with administration, civil law etc. and only minimally with matters of culture, education. The other body would consist of representatives of all members of the particular

nation, irrespective of where in the Confederation they live. There would have to be some coordination on the global level within each one of these two layers separately. And, naturally, there would also have to be some interrelation between these two bodies within each national state, as well as between the two layers on the global or central level. Should a conflict of interest between these two bodies arise, for instance grievances of Hungarians living on the Slovak territory or vice versa, this would be treated on the global level with all states and ethnic nations involved. Not just as a local scuffle between the two partners.

Of course, I am aware of many gaps, to be filled in, and many details to be worked out. And even so, for the time being, these must remain pure fantasies, of no practical political value. So let me turn to the cultural aspects of Slovak-Hungarian relations.

One thing can be said immediately : when dealing with culture rather than politics, we do not have to be so modest about living in far-away Australia, and having no influence on what is happening with our two nations in the Old World. The very discussion of a possible future organisation of Central Europe, as speculative and futile as it might seem from the political point of view, can enrich both our cultures in the sense that it could lead to a better Hungarian understanding of the Slovak position, and a better Slovak understanding of the Hungarian position. The attitude "I do not necessarily agree with all what you say, but I can see your point" is hard to translate into both Slovak as well as Hungarian. And not only grammatically. But we, Slovaks or Hungarians, who have lived long enough in the Anglo-Saxon world have learned to appreciate the importance of this attitude for a civilised coexistence of diverse points of view, especially if they were formed by different historical experiences. It is of secondary relevance that we live geographically so far from our original homelands. And given the politically rigid and stale situation in Slovakia and Hungary, it is of primary importance that we can formulate our positions on the background of a culture that with all its faults, is unthinkable without its openness and political freedom.

But this is culture, or rather civilisation, in the broader sense, that is not exclusively tied to one particular ethnicum. Tolerance and mutual respect is — or should be — the common denominator of all cultures, at least those which arose from the Judeo-Christian moral tradition. Culture, national culture, goes deeper than that. Speaking on the folkloristic aspect of his ethnic heritage the Slovak-American political philosopher Michael Novak says

...even if one is separated from the objects, sights, sounds, works of art, and other countless artifacts which express the genius of one's own people, still, the inner realities which those objects seem to express live on buried in one's heart for generations. Even the unassuming folk songs of the Slovak countryside, which thanks to modern technology I can listen to on records, seem to put into melody for me emotions that no other songs quite touch.

And what about the "unassuming folk songs of the Hungarian countryside" or the sentimental power of a halgató? And what about creations of individual members of the national genius, Slovak or Hungarian? Perhaps one has to live in America or in Australia to arrive at this deep appreciation of the uniqueness of one's national heritage. But I would like to suggest even more. Namely, that our life in ethnic diaspora makes us more sensitive not only towards our own ethnic heritage, but also towards those of our traditional neighbours, if we only try. This at least is my personal experience with the Hungarian and other Central European cultures.

One more thing that has to be said from the Slovak point of view: Slovak historians speak of an external and an internal Slovak history. Our external history is more or less a subset of Hungarian history for a period of 1000 years. The internal Slovak history is something less tangible, concerned more with the development of the national mentality than with historical events. We have our own folklore and it is as self-contained as it could be. But because of our long historic hibernation, our outer cultural manifestations are not as self-contained. They are often intertwined with those of the Hungarian element. Insensitivity or disrespect for this fact can lead to all sorts of resentments and bitterness. Admittedly, on both the Slovak as well as the Hungarian side, but because of the historically uneven relationship between

our two nations, the Slovaks tend to be more often on the receiving side. And the "én és a kisöcsém¹" attitude, even if subconscious, does not help either.

There is another reason why we should not overestimate the handicap of our geographic separation from Central Europe: it is the advent of the Information society, the 'global village' of Marshall McLuhan that is becoming more and more of a reality due to television, satellites and personal computers. In the age of computers we are increasingly dealing with a space of cultures, in the widest meaning of the word, ethnic cultures included, connected by electronic communication devices, rather than with the physical space of cities and countries connected by the motorcar and aeroplane. Many a futurologist predicts that this 'globalisation' will bring about an increased ethnic self-awareness of the cultural uniqueness of one's own backgrounds. It certainly is desirable, as was the increased ecological awareness a couple of decades ago:

The advent of the Industrial society brought about a change in our attitude to our physical habitat. We had to invent ecology to protect what before used to be our enemy to be conquered. The advent of the Information society is changing our attitude towards our natural cultural habitat, which on the individual level is religion in the broadest sense, and on the collective level is nationality in the ethnic meaning of the word. We will have to invent something that will bring the change in our minds, so that nationalism and patriotism, together with religion, that used to divide us, will be protected as something that will keep us separate and above the artificial intelligences that we are about to create. The smallest flower living in the dirtiest soil is aesthetically preferable to the most magnificent plant made of plastic. We have learned that. We still have to learn that the same is true about natural and artificial cultures.

So it is not so much a matter of patriotism but it is becoming more and more everybody's duty towards humanity as a whole, to contribute to the preservation of that part of the 'ethnic ecosystem' which each person is familiar with, either through having been born into, or through contacts. One day our grandchildren will look at all national heritages, Hungarian, Slovak, but also German or Russian, as needing preservation,

¹me and my younger brother

and if necessary protection, irrespective of their past rôles in history. Just as we feel today that every species of our animal world needs to be preserved, and if necessary protected, herbivorous but also carnivorous.

There are many interpretations of the slogan "Magyarország nem volt, hanem lesz¹". Some are unrealistic, some are controversial, to say the least, from the point of view of Hungary's neighbours, some are neither. I am grateful for having been given this opportunity to present an interpretation which I personally prefer. An interpretation that could be acceptable to many, if not all, Slovaks. Of a Hungary whose greatness is first of all in its cultural and spiritual achievements and contribution to the Christian civilisation, rather than in the size of the territory it controls. One cannot undo the political Trianon, but one can prevent a cultural and spiritual Trianon. And *this* prevention is in the interest of all Central Europeans, including the Slovaks.

In *this sense* we can join our Hungarian neighbours in their belief that the meaning of Hungary is not in the past, but in the future. And ask them to join us believing, in the same spirit, that also the meaning of Slovakia is not in the past, but in the future.

¹Hungary is not in the past but in the future