

Growing isolation: political and ethnic tensions in the Slovak Republic

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1. Introduction

Of all Central European capital cities, Bratislava is situated closest to the borders of the European Union. In fact, the capital city of the Slovak Republic is located at the border of the Union, only 60 kilometres from Vienna. However, in political terms, Bratislava is much further away from the West than other Central European capital cities such as Warsaw, Prague and Budapest. The process of transforming Slovakia from a communist state into a liberal democracy and market-oriented economy is lagging behind compared to changes in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Under the present administration of nationalists and neo-communists, democracy in Slovakia has been seriously undermined. In addition, antagonism between the ruling Slovak political parties and representatives of the 570,000 strong Hungarian minority has notably increased. Relations with neighbouring states have also deteriorated under the government headed by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar.

As a result of growing political and ethnic tensions, Slovakia has become increasingly isolated. The Poles, Czechs and Hungarians have joined the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have been invited to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and will start negotiations to join the European Union (EU) in 1998. The Slovaks, however, did not make the grade for the next wave of NATO expansion and are stuck in the queue for the other two 'clubs'.

2. Political tensions

In the past three years, political tensions have increased dramatically between the government¹ and Prime Minister Mečiar on the one hand, and opposition parties² and the President on the other. Particularly since 1994, the government and the three ruling political parties have displayed disrespect for democratic principles and the rule of law. They have repeatedly attacked the independence and integrity of state institutions, such as the presidency, parliament, and the judiciary.

The position of the President, Michal Kováč, and the presidency as an institution have been undermined by continuous attacks. The sometimes personal infighting between the President and the Prime Minister is linked

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1. The government is composed of representatives of Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and its junior coalition partners, the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Slovak Worker's Party (ZRS).
 2. The main opposition parties are the Christian Democrats (KDH), Social Democrats (SDL), Liberal Democrats (DU and DS), and three political organisations representing the Hungarian minority (MKDM, Együttélés, MPP).

to major political choices for the country as a whole. Kováčik favours democratic methods and rapid integration with Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO. Mečiar appears to prefer closer ties with Russia, while displaying authoritarian tendencies of his own. The Prime Minister and the government have tried to discredit Kováčik, making a big issue of his son's possible involvement in a fraud case. Press speculation is widespread that elements of the Slovak Information Service (SIS) were involved in the violent abduction of the President's son to Austria in an attempt to have him arrested by the Austrians in connection with the fraud case. Both the SIS and the government have frustrated the investigation into the torture and kidnapping of Kováčik junior.³

In relation to this case, an intermediary of a former member of the SIS and a self-proclaimed witness to the kidnapping died when his car exploded.⁴ Besides attempts to damage the reputation of the President, the budget of the Presidency was sharply cut and some of his prerogatives removed by Parliament. The latter took away the President's right to appoint the Director of the intelligence service SIS and the Chief of the General Staff, placing these institutions under government control. Other undertakings by the Mečiar government to undermine the presidency include its policy to thwart the NATO/Presidency referendum of May 1997.

The ballot, approved by the referendum commission, contained four questions. Three were on NATO admission and one on direct presidential election. Interior Minister Gustav Krajci, however, distributed ballotpapers with only three questions, all concerning NATO. As a direct result, the referendum was widely boycotted by Slovak voters and officially declared void. As an indirect consequence, it is likely that the presidential duties will be handed over to Mečiar and his government after March 1998, when Kováčik's five-year term expires. According to the Constitution, the Prime Minister will take over most of these tasks until Parliament is able to agree on a new candidate. These presidential duties will probably remain in the hands of Mečiar until the general elections scheduled for autumn 1998 since it is unlikely that any candidate put forward by the government or the opposition will be able to receive the necessary three-fifths majority in Parliament.⁵

Especially since 1994, the political climate in this one-chamber assembly has been highly polarised. Increasingly, it does not carry out its duties in conditions which comply with the rules for the operation of

3. U.S. Department of State, *The Slovak Republic country report on human rights practices for 1996*, Washington D.C., 1997.

4. A few hours after this incident in 1996, the Ministry of the Interior released a statement saying that the blast had been caused by a technical defect. A few months later, the authorities investigating the incident officially concluded that a bomb was the cause of the explosion. *Ibid.*

5. See 'Slovakia to be without President?', *OMRI Daily Digest*, 17 December 1996.

democracy. For instance, the rights of the opposition are not fully respected, particularly with regard to its membership of Parliamentary Committees. Until 1997, the ruling parties refused to include any opposition representation in the body which oversees the Slovak Information Service and allowed only token opposition representation in other key committees and supervisory bodies. Moreover, Me_iar's HZDS and its junior coalition parties have repeatedly demonstrated their reluctance to discuss subjects raised by the opposition by means boycotts of parliamentary sessions that were called for by the opposition parties.

In 1995, the Slovak government tried to strip MPs of the oppositional Democratic Union (DU) of their mandate, claiming that the DU was not eligible to campaign in the elections. It ordered a large-scale investigation into charges that the signatures on petitions in the autumn 1994 parliamentary elections were fraudulent.⁶ In December 1996, MP Frantisek Gaulieder was ousted from Parliament against his will after he had earlier resigned his membership in the HZDS-faction in Parliament. A bomb exploded at his home two days later. These and other actions of the ruling parties served to consolidate the government's power in a manner that had a negative impact on the course of pluralism, separation of powers, and overall democratic development.⁷

At the same time, the government obstructed the functioning of the judiciary, the Attorney-General and the police on different occasions. Ministers interfered in the course of police investigations, in particular in the case of the kidnapping of the son of the President. In this particular case one leading police investigator resigned under pressure; another was removed from the case, as was their supervisor. Furthermore, the independence and objectivity of the judiciary has been challenged by senior members of the government, including the Prime Minister. In the Gaulieder case, Me_iar's HZDS and its coalition parties, the ruling majority in Parliament, even refused to bow to a Constitutional Court decision and to reinstate the MP who was stripped of his mandate in 1996. Despite this lack of respect and pressure from the government, the Constitutional Court has played a very active role in endeavouring to keep a balance between the various powers and preserving their respective responsibilities as defined by the Constitution.

In addition to the government's attacks on the independence and

6. The police questioned nearly 15,000 individuals who were listed on the Democratic Union petitions to verify that they had signed. In some cases, the police also allegedly questioned these citizens regarding their political views and threatened them with reprisals if they confirmed their signatures to be genuine, U.S. Department of State, *The Slovak Republic country report on human rights practices for 1995*, Washington D.C., 1996, p. 6.

7. U.S. State Department, *The Slovak Republic country report on human rights practices for 1995*, Washington D.C., 1996; U.S. State Department, *The Slovak Republic country report on human rights practices for 1996*, Washington D.C., 1997.

integrity of the presidency, Parliament, and the judiciary, the ruling parties have tried to increase their dominant position by exercising considerable influence on the media. Through restrictive laws, fiscal policies, and an atmosphere of intimidation, the government has attempted to curb freedom of expression in certain fields. In particular the politicisation of the state-owned broadcasting media has become a significant problem. Since 1994, the diversity of views, political coverage, and objectivity of news and documentary programming on Slovak television have dropped sharply.⁸

The government's considerable influence on the public radio and television networks is marked by a very substantial imbalance in the amount of access granted to the government and the opposition.⁹ A growing private audio-visual sector and the growing number of foreign radio and television stations have substantially increased freedom of expression. However, the private sector is confronted with huge increases in costs imposed by the state-owned telecommunications company. Particularly in the field of the written media an atmosphere of intimidation has gradually emerged. The beating of an opposition journalist, widespread dismissals of public officials for political reasons, and public questioning of the patriotism of citizens and journalists who spoke critically of developments in Slovakia contributed to this atmosphere.¹⁰

An attempt by the government to amend the Criminal Code, which would make it a punishable offence to facilitate the spread of false information damaging to the interests of the Slovak Republic, also contributed to a growing reluctance to criticise the government openly.¹¹ A number of opposition journalists who did not dampen their criticism were confronted with defamation suits by the government and the revocation of their accreditation by the Government Press Office.

Pro-government dailies, on the other hand, are rewarded with advertisements by state-owned companies and other forms of direct and indirect public finance.¹² Besides these newspapers and state-owned radio and television, Slovakia's official news agency, TASR, is also very much in line with government policies.¹³

Despite these difficulties in the field of the media, the transition of Slovakia's media from state domination to a freer, more autonomous and editorially-independent channel for the expression of ideas, opinions and criticism has come a long way compared to the situation before 1989. It

8. See U.S. Department of State, *The Slovak Republic country report on human rights practices for 1995*, Washington D.C., 1996.

9. 'Agenda 2000' - Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application for Membership of the European Union, 1997.

10. *Ibid*, *supra* note 8.

11. *Ibid*.

12. *Ibid*, *supra* note 9.

13. J. Frotz, 'Central and East European news agencies in transition' in: *OSCE ODIHR Bulletin*, 1997, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 22-23.

should also be noted that despite difficulties for the independent and opposition press, Slovakia is not on the 1997 *Reporters sans Frontières* list of OSCE participating-states in which press-freedom is threatened.

The above-mentioned problems, clearly demonstrate however, the attempts of the government to extend its political control over various sectors of civil society. Besides influencing the media, these attempts have affected the process of privatisation. This process was carried out in conditions which do not meet the requirements of transparency and fairness. The mechanisms for carrying it out were criticised not only by the opposition, but also by the Constitutional Court.¹⁴

The government's attempt to control society is also illustrated by the Law on Higher Education. This law adopted in 1996, gives the government greater powers to intervene in the curriculum, faculty promotions, and the appointment of university lecturers. More serious are the growing number of politically-motivated purges on all levels of state administration. Particularly in 1995, there were widespread dismissals of public officials for political reasons.¹⁵

The increasing activities of the secret service, however, pose another serious threat to the democratisation process in Slovakia. It has been more than seven years since the Czechoslovak authorities in Prague dissolved by decree the feared communist State Security Service (StB). The dissolution took years to be carried out in the Czech lands. In Slovakia, however, the service was never fully dismantled. Today, the Slovak Intelligence Agency SIS operates much as the StB did before 1989. Domestic and foreign journalists, opposition activists and church officials are routinely subjected to surveillance. According to a co-founder of the SIS in 1993, 'SIS is an institution which can serve to strengthen the autocratic regime of Vladimir Me_iar'.¹⁶ According to the same source, the relationship between the SIS and its Russian federal counterpart has become 'extraordinarily intensive'.

3. Ethnic tensions

Slovakia's 600,000 strong Hungarian minority, makes up eleven percent of the country's total population. The region they inhabit constitutes an almost continuous, five-hundred kilometre long strip along the Slovak-Hungarian border between Bratislava and Slovakia's south-east border with the Ukraine. In this region, Hungarians constitute a numerical majority in many

14. In 1994, charges by the President and the opposition that Me_iar was seeking to finance the HZDS out of the proceeds of the privatization of state industry resulted in the fall of the second Me_iar government. See: S. Szomolányi, 'Old elites in the new Slovak state and their current transformations' in: S. Szomolányi, G. Meseznikov, *The Slovak path of transition*, Bratislava, 1994, pp. 63-82.

15. See U.S. Department of State, *The Slovak Republic country report on human rights practices for 1995*, Washington D.C., 1996.

16. 'Slovakia: intelligence service reverts to communist-era practices', *Radio Free Europe*, 29 May 1997.

towns and villages.¹⁷ Especially in south-west and south-east Slovakia, these municipalities form a more or less compact 'Hungarian' region.

The Hungarian minority is represented in the 150-seat Slovak National Council by 17 Members of Parliament. They have been elected by the election list of the Hungarian Coalition. This coalition is comprised of the three main Hungarian parties.¹⁸ These parties cover the whole traditional political spectrum except for the far left and the far right.

The relationship between these Hungarian parties and the Slovak government has been strained since Slovakia's declaration of independence following the election victory of nationalistic parties in the 1992 general elections.¹⁹ Not least for historical reasons, this relationship has many aspects which are considered particularly sensitive in the eyes of both sides.²⁰ According to the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the main sensitive questions include minority claims for teaching in their mother tongue, for the use of their mother tongue in official communications, for their names to be registered in the Hungarian version, for bilingual road signs in their areas of settlement, for appropriate state assistance for cultural projects, and for full participation in the conduct of the political life of the country.²¹ After some delay and international pressure, some of these questions were properly addressed by the Slovak government. Most issues, however, are still relevant today despite promises by the authorities to settle them. In addition, new issues of dispute emerged under the present Mešiar administration.

The introduction of a new law on the state language, the government's refusal to introduce a law on minority languages, gerrymandering administrative districts, and the government's reluctance to implement the bilateral treaty between Slovakia and Hungary resulted in fierce and sometimes unbridled reactions from representatives of the Hungarian minority. These representatives desire 'fair' opportunities to preserve their national identity. To this end, they call for more legal guarantees and self-determination with regard to the expression, protection and development of the national identity of the Hungarian minority within the region it inhabits.

On this point, the Hungarians have come into conflict with the

17. According to the Czecho-Slovak population census of 1991, 78 percent of the Hungarian minority live in a municipality in which they constitute a numerical majority.

18. The three parties are Együttélés (9 seats), the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (7 seats), and the Hungarian Civic Party (1 seat).

19. In the course of the election campaign, very strong anti-Hungarian sentiments were vented in Slovakia (Kruyzen 1994). The parliamentary election programme of the Slovak National Party in particular contained many anti-Hungarian elements.

20. *The role of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in OSCE conflict prevention: an introduction, op. cit.*, The Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations, The Hague, 1997, p. 72.

21. Ibid.

majority of the Slovak political parties. The latter often perceive the Hungarian efforts to preserve their distinct national identity as opposing their attempts to elevate the process of nation building. The ruling nationalistic parties even view the Hungarian demands for the protection of their Hungarian identity as a sign of the group's disloyalty towards the young Slovak state. Particularly the Hungarian demands for territorial autonomy are regarded as a first step to secession.

A proposal by the three main Hungarian parties in 1994 to create autonomous administrative regions in the south of Slovakia in which Hungarians would have certain special rights evoked a great deal of negative publicity in the Slovak media. The main criticism from the side of the Slovaks concerned the territorial aspects of this so-called Komárno Proposal. The overwhelming majority of Slovak politicians and the Slovak media accused the Hungarian representatives of seeking a territorial redivision of the south of Slovakia. That division would supposedly lead to a situation in which Slovaks would become a numerical minority in the proposed administrative territories. In addition, many Slovaks perceived the Komárno Proposal as a threat to the territorial integrity of their young republic.²² Afraid that history might repeat itself, they believed the government should not give in to the demands of the Hungarians. This notion among Slovaks was partly caused by the map of the proposed 'Hungarian' region. It resembles that of the territories annexed by Hungary in 1938. Whether sincerely felt or simulated, the fear of secession by regions predominantly inhabited by Hungarians was one of the arguments used by Slovak politicians and journalists to condemn the minority's call for self-determination. The Slovak National Party, a junior member of the ruling coalition, reacted to the Komárno Proposal by calling for a ban on Hungarian political parties.

By demanding a form of regional territorial self-determination and producing a new map of the south of Slovakia, the Hungarian representatives alienated themselves from their Slovak counterparts and stirred up distrust among Slovaks. It should be noted, however, that the Komárno Proposal was a direct reaction to a government plan that attempted to reduce the influence of the Hungarian minority at the regional level by gerrymandering the size and boundaries of existing administrative districts.²³

Similarly, the Mešiar government's attacks on Hungarian schools evoked fierce reactions among the Hungarian minority as well as a number of far-reaching demands regarding cultural and educational autonomy.

22. See E. Bakker, 'Preservation of identity in plural democratic states: the case of Slovakia's Hungarian minority' in: P. Pellenbarg, F. Schuurmans and J. de Vries, eds., *Reisgenoten*, Groningen, 1997, pp. 301-320.

23. See E. Bakker, 'Minority conflicts in Slovakia and Hungary?', Capelle a/d IJssel, 1997, p. 88 ff.

These and other government policies are generally perceived as anti-Hungarian by representatives of the minority, or as acts of oppression with nationalistic overtones. Others stress that the restrictive minority policies should be seen as part of the general pressure on oppositional groups.²⁴

Whether specifically anti-minority, anti-Hungarian or anti-opposition, Me_iar's restrictive and sometimes even repressive policies have resulted in an increasingly hostile relationship between the government and the minorities. Although there are no indications of ethnically-based violence as yet, a certain level of underlying tension cannot be denied. It should be stressed, however, that occasional outbreaks of anti-Hungarian feeling do occur, mostly in areas where Slovaks and Hungarians do not coexist. In the south of Slovakia, the two groups continue to coexist peacefully though more and more members of the Hungarian minority feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens.

4. Reactions of the international community

The increasing tensions related to the government's disrespect for democratic principles, the rule of law, and minority rights has increasingly worried the international community. The EU, individual member states, neighbouring Hungary, the United States and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities have repeatedly expressed concern over the pace of democratic reform and the political and ethnic tensions in Slovakia.

The first critical political reports and formal warnings from the international community to the Me_iar government were released in 1994 shortly after the third Me_iar government took office. In November of that year, the European Commission issued its first *démarche* voicing anxiety about political developments in Slovakia. Many similar 'communiqués', 'aide-memoires', diplomatic notes and official statements would follow. With regard to minority rights, the HCNM submitted a series of recommendations to the Slovak government based on a number of visits to Slovakia and the reports by a team of experts.

In 1995, U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry said Slovakia would need to strengthen democracy before it could join NATO. British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind warned that the country would gain entry to the EU only if it meets basic democratic standards. A few days later the EU sent a second *démarche* to Prime Minister Me_iar expressing its concerns about the political situation in Slovakia. Four EU ambassadors stated that the EU had decided to say in public what it had been saying privately to Slovak officials for several months. The U.S. embassy also issued a statement saying President Bill Clinton was concerned by developments in the country. Pressure on Slovakia was further increased by a resolution of the European Parliament recommending that the government in Bratislava respect the

24. See M. Kusy, 'Minorities and regionalization in Slovakia: regionalization as a solution for the Hungarian minority issue in Slovakia', in: *Helsinki Monitor*, 1996, no. 1, pp. 58-64.

basic principles of democracy and constitutional state, as well as human rights and the rights of minorities. The Parliament warned that it might close its office in Slovakia and halt its assistance programmes if Me_iar's government did not take democratic principles into account.

In 1996, the United States, the EU, its individual member states, neighbouring Hungary, and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities continued their policies of expressing concern for political and ethnic tensions in Slovakia and warned of the consequences regarding co-operation programmes and future NATO and EU enlargement. In February, EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Hans van den Broek called on Slovakia to further develop and strengthen democratic institutions and to respect minority rights and freedom of speech.

In April, the U.S. State Department expressed concern about a new Slovak law that could restrict freedom of speech and warned that the law contradicted the democratic values shared among NATO countries. Pressure on the Slovak government increased in the summer of 1996. The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl noted that the conditions for Slovakia's entry to the EU had not improved but had rather deteriorated. A planned official high-level trip by Prime Minister Me_iar to Germany was postponed and eventually cancelled by Bonn. On a visit to Bratislava with Hillary Clinton in June, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Madeline Albright, criticised the Slovak government and said that the country was not yet ready for integration into Western structures.

By 1997, the international community seemed to have run out of patience with the Me_iar government. The Gaulieder case, the thwarting of the NATO / President referendum, and the government's refusal to introduce a law on minority languages hardened the growing international consensus that Slovakia is not committed to respecting democracy, the rule of law, and minority rights. Directly formulated diplomatic notes and official statements demanded an immediate and radical change to its political course. More than once, senior officials of the EU warned about the serious consequences for Slovakia's early entry to the Union.

In June 1997, a joint EU-Slovak parliamentary committee gave Slovakia one last chance to join talks on entering an expanded EU. It gave the Slovak government until the end of November to implement specific changes in domestic policy. It recommended resuming political dialogue between the ruling coalition and the opposition; ensuring opposition participation in special control committees to oversee intelligence activities; and the preparation of legislation on the use of national minority languages. One month earlier, EU Commissioner Hans van den Broek gave a similar deadline to Slovak Prime Minister Me_iar.

5. The government's reaction to international criticism

Instead of heeding international concern, the Slovak government angrily

rejected the worries and criticisms of the United States and the EU. Repeatedly, it claimed that foreign allegations were based either on a false interpretation of laws and the Slovak Constitution or were drawn from misinformation and disinformation provided solely by opposition forces. Following the NATO summit in Madrid, it accused international organisations of an unbalanced attitude towards Slovakia and using different yardsticks by which to measure Slovakia's progress.

The government also claimed a lack of willingness by the international community to understand the problems of a young state and a young democracy in an attempt to deny any responsibility for Slovakia's growing international isolation. The tone of the rejections have often been beyond what is generally accepted in Western diplomatic circles. As a rejection of a European Parliament resolution in 1995, the foreign ministry responded by saying that the resolution 'is reminiscent of recent history, when the leader of Nazi Germany first sent *démarches* to states and then occupied them with tanks'.²⁵ Comparing U.S. ambassador Ralph Johnson with the Soviet ambassador in Czechoslovakia who played an important role in the Soviet invasion in 1968, was Mečiar's reaction to Johnson's explanation in August 1997 as to why Slovakia could not enter NATO.²⁶

Rebuffing international criticism and perceiving it as an act of interference in domestic affairs, the Slovak government seems to reject the fact that – as a participant of the OSCE – Slovakia has pledged to recognise human rights and the rule of law as regards issues which are not only the internal concern of the country involved.

Despite this attitude and the allegations levelled against the government, Bratislava has repeatedly stated that the government is committed to making the grade for the next wave of NATO and EU expansion. Zdenka Kramplová, the third Slovak Foreign Minister in as many years, ²⁷ insisted that the government was taking steps to meet the conditions for EU membership. According to Deputy Prime Minister Katarina Tóthová, however, the government is devoting its energies to the economy, 'leaving it little time to combat the misinformation and disinformation about democracy in Slovakia'.²⁸

25. 'European Parliament passes resolution on Slovakia', *OMRI Daily Digest*, 17 November 1995.

26. 'Slovakia won't be accepted to NATO because of deficits in democracy', *GugtSp News*, 10 August 1997.

27. Former Foreign Affairs Minister Schenk (1994-1996) was removed from the Cabinet by Mečiar. Many observers perceived it as an attempt by the Prime Minister to find a scapegoat for Slovakia's negative reputation in the West, 'Slovakia: Cabinet shuffle intended to improve reputation abroad', *Radio Free Europe*, 28 August 1996. Pavol Hamčík, a Minister between 1996 and 1997, resigned in protest over the way in which a controversial referendum on NATO and direct presidential elections was conducted, 'Slovakia: Kovac appoints new Foreign Minister', *Radio Free Europe*, 11 June 1997.

28. 'Slovakia: Minister says laws being adapted for EU', *op. cit.*, *Radio Free Europe*, 27 June

6. Consequences

Until 1994, there were high hopes that Slovakia's government would prepare the country to join NATO in the first round. In fact, when NATO enlargement was first seriously discussed, Slovakia was frequently mentioned as a likely candidate for early admission. The same holds true with regard to the first wave of expansion of the EU.

One year after Mečiar regained power for the third time in 1994, however, the first signs of isolation were already apparent. The direct consequences of growing political and ethnic tensions in the following years became very concrete and visible to all in 1997. The NATO Summit in Madrid in July showed that Slovakia was not listed among the first group of Central European states that were invited to join NATO. The country was not even mentioned in the declaration. Romania, Slovenia, and the Baltic States were at least referred to in the light of future NATO enlargement.

Two months later a number of Central European states were invited to commence negotiations concerning EU membership.²⁹ The Slovak Republic was not among this first group. According to the European Commission, the country did not meet all of the three criteria that were formulated at the Copenhagen European Council of June 1993. These criteria were the following:

- 1) stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- 2) the existence of a functioning market economy, as well as the ability to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union;
- 3) the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political economic and monetary union.³⁰

In the Opinion on Slovakia's application for membership of the EU, the Commission concluded that '[...] Slovakia does not fulfil in a satisfying manner the political conditions set out by the European Council in Copenhagen, because of the instability of Slovakia's institutions, their lack of rootedness in political life and the shortcomings in the functioning of democracy. This situation is so much more regrettable since Slovakia could satisfy the economic criteria in the medium term and is firmly committed to take on the *acquis*, particularly concerning the internal market even if further progress is still required to ensure the effective application of the *acquis*. In the light of these considerations, the Commission considers that negotiations for accession to the European Union should be opened with

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29. The countries invited in July 1997 to EU membership talks were Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Cyprus.

30. 'Agenda 2000' - Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application for Membership of the European Union, Preface, 1997.

Slovakia as soon as it has made sufficient progress in satisfying the conditions of membership defined by the European Council in Copenhagen'.³¹

The economic and political consequences of the EU's refusal to start negotiations with Slovakia for membership of the Union are difficult to determine. It is clear, however, that the EU and NATO decisions were a serious blow to liberal and Western-oriented political groups in Slovakia. These groups fear that Slovakia will miss out in its share of the millions of ECUs which the EU will make available for applicants between the years 2000 and 2006. The opposition is also afraid of the negative impact of Slovakia's failure to integrate with Western structures on foreign investment. Whereas foreign companies are bringing capital and know-how to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, Slovakia is host to few Western firms. Continuing ethnic and political tensions as well as political isolation may prolong the wait-and-see approach of international investors towards the country that, nonetheless, has a quickly growing economy and that has made significant progress in transposing legislation related to key areas of the single European market.

Regarding the consequences of Slovakia's growing isolation, representatives of the Hungarian minority have found themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, they have contributed to and are happy to see the increased pressure on the Slovak government. This pressure, they hope, will lead to the long expected law on minority languages and a general improvement of their situation. On the other hand, they are afraid that the government will ignore international criticism and will lead Slovakia to further alienation with the West. They realise that the position of the Hungarian minority may even worsen if Slovakia will not be invited to join NATO and the EU in the second wave of expansion.

The reaction of the ruling nationalistic political parties to Slovakia's failure to join NATO and the EU also gives rise to concern over its negative impact on the image and international prestige of their young independent republic. These parties also fear the loss of popularity that may be related to this failure a year before the general elections. According to a public opinion poll released in November 1997, opposition parties are in the lead. Some 31 percent of Slovaks would vote for the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), the umbrella grouping of five opposition parties.³² The SDK is followed by Prime Minister Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia with 26 percent, the opposition Democratic Left Party and the Hungarian Coalition

31. Ibid., Part 4.3. General evaluation.

32. Until 1997, cooperation between the main opposition parties was limited. Political disputes and rivalry had a negative impact on the image and effectiveness of these parties. Since the forming of the SDK, the united moderate political centre is regarded as much stronger and a real challenge to Mečiar's governing coalition for the forthcoming elections.

with 11 percent each. The Slovak National Party, a minor government coalition member, is the last party to cross the five-percent threshold necessary to enter parliament. The third government coalition member, the Slovak Worker's Party, would not be re-elected into parliament according to the poll.³³ However, as events in 1994 have shown, the present ruling parties may still manage to win the forthcoming elections, scheduled for autumn 1998, despite decreasing popularity in 1997.³⁴

The above-mentioned fear of the opposition and the Hungarian minority that further international isolation of Slovakia will follow is not only based on past experiences, but also on recent political developments following the country's failure to join NATO and the EU. Mounting international pressure has not led to the return of the MP who was stripped of his mandate in 1996; political dialogue between the ruling coalition and the opposition; opposition participation in special parliamentary commissions; and the preparation of legislation on the use of minority languages, as recommended by the U.S. and the EU. On the contrary, instead of dialogue, the opposition, the President, and the opposition media were blamed for the failure of the country's foreign policy. In November 1997, despite promises to prepare such a law, the government approved a memorandum in which it attempted to persuade its critics abroad that there is no need for a law on minority languages.

As far as can be derived from these and other recent political developments, it seems that Slovakia's growing international isolation is not among the main concerns of the Me_iar government. Although the Prime Minister and the ruling parties fear that part of the electorate may turn their backs on them as a result of their failure to lead Slovakia into NATO and the EU, they also see opportunities to turn defeat at the international stage into victory in the domestic political arena. Through government-controlled media, they manage to explain international concern and criticism to their supporters as attacks and conspiracies against the young Slovak Republic, or as the result of attempts by the opposition to damage Slovakia's image abroad in order to overthrow the government.

The above-mentioned recent developments and attempts to use international criticism to gain public support as the guardian of the independent state or to blacken the opposition suggest that future membership of NATO and the EU will remain very unlikely in the near-future if the present government manages to win the forthcoming general elections.

33. 'Opposition leading in polls', *OMRI Daily Digest*, 4 November 1997.

34. Political instruments available to Me_iar and his allies to defeat growing opposition include large funds for political campaigning, the government's considerable influence on the public radio and television networks, the opportunity to change the electoral law, and, possibly, incriminating information gathered by the SIS to discredit his political rivals as well as various methods for tampering with election results. In addition, the Prime Minister's charisma and political skills should not be underestimated.

7. Concluding remarks

In the last three years, under Prime Minister Mečiar's government, political and ethnic tensions in Slovakia have gradually increased to a level that has alarmed the international community. As a reaction, the U.S., EU, individual member states, Hungary and the OSCE have gradually changed their policies towards the country from expressing concern to formulating recommendations and issuing *démarches*. In mid-1997 the international community, in particular the U.S. and EU, went as far as to demand concrete policy opportunities by the Slovak government in certain fields. By the end of 1997 NATO and the EU answered Bratislava's reluctance to heed Western concern and implement political changes by rebuffing Slovakia's applications for membership. Hence, in a period of just three years, the Mečiar government has turned Slovakia from a likely future member of NATO and the EU to the only Central European state to be turned down by both 'clubs'.

In other words, this government and the ruling parties have further widened the gap between the Slovak Parliament's geographical distance from Western Europe – literally a stone's throw from the Slovak-Austrian border – and its political distance – the time it takes up until the second wave of NATO and EU enlargement.

If NATO and EU member states want to see this gap closed and want to welcome a democratic Slovak Republic into their organisations in the second expansion wave, they need to support those groups in Slovakia that are receptive to Western integration. They need to bolster national and local organisations that want to contribute to the development of a liberal democracy and a civil society. The main target groups are the moderate political centre – recently united in the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) – the social democratic Party of the Left (SDĽ) and the parties representing the Hungarian minority.

Unlike 1994 when the latter formulated their far-reaching demand for a form of territorial autonomy in the first month of the election year, these parties should be enjoined not to come up with any radical demand on the eve of the 1998 local and general elections. The Hungarian parties should be persuaded to keep a low profile in order to prevent Mečiar and his nationalistic coalition partner, the Slovak National Party, from successfully playing the ethnic card. In particular the HCNM can play an important role in this respect. In addition, non-state and independent groups and organisations – such as trade unions, social movements, environmentalists and churches – need backing if the international community wants to invest in a Western-oriented democratic Slovakia. Other groups that provide the key for Slovakia's future as a member of NATO and the EU include entrepreneurs and students.

Finally, because of the government's considerable influence on the

media, it is important to support the independent media in order to give the above-mentioned groups and organisations a fairer chance to show their activities and opinions to the general public. Particularly in this election year, access to the print media and particularly the electronic media will very much influence the chances for the opposition to gain power and to close the gap between Slovakia's geographical distance from Western Europe and its political distance from integration with Western institutions.