

The Identity of the National Minorities in Slovakia during 1918–1989 within the Context of the State Policy

MARTIN PEKÁR



Significant role in forming the identity of national and ethnic minorities is played by the living conditions provided by the country in which these minorities live. The following contribution outlines the possible ways of developing the ethnic national consciousness and identity on the territory of Slovakia during the twentieth century from the perspective of the selected elements of the state policy. It focuses on national minorities in relation to such aspects of the state policy as the governmental structure of the country, legislative regulation of the minority rights, institutional protection of minorities, language and education policy and the status of minorities in the media.

From the disintegration of Austria-Hungary in 1918 up to the year 1989 several political systems, most of them non-democratic and totalitarian, were in operation, which was affected by the external factors and unfavourable geopolitical environment.¹ Those political systems were linked to the already non-existent state of Czechoslovakia (in existence during the years 1918–1939 and 1945–1989), which arose as one of the Habsburg successor states, and to the independent Slovak Republic during the years 1939–1945.

As a consequence of the circumstances leading to the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and the border settings of the country, the issue concerning minorities, their position within the society and the relationship between minorities and the state-forming majority became a very touchy subject. On the one side, it was inevitable to fulfil the international legal commitments concerning minorities, as these resulted from the settling of the conditions in Europe after World War I. On the other side, there was a new state coming into existence, confronted with the presence, but for the most part, with the discontent of sizeable minorities.

National minorities became, as to their number, the significant element of the forming society. Their proportion and settlement were the result of the centuries-

¹ L. Lipták, "Vonkajšie a vnútorné faktory formovania politických systémov na Slovensku," [External and Internal Factors of the Formation of the Political Systems in Slovakia] in *Od diktatúry k diktatúre*. ed. M. Barnovský, Bratislava 1995, 8–14.

long historical development. This long-term steady development, mainly associated with the existence of the Habsburg monarchy, was disrupted by the outcomes of the negotiations of the world powers at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, next by World War II and also by the changes of the political systems on the territory of Slovakia in the twentieth century. Such dramatic situation, marked by so many changes, was reflected in the way the minority issue was covered in the Slovak historical literature. The chronology of certain problematic issues can hardly be traced, since these were perceived from different angles as the periods changed. Speaking of the results of the censuses, which were moreover carried out on different methodical bases, the figures are incompatible as a result of, for instance, the standpoint of the ruling regime to the respective ethnic minority, frequent changes in the territorial division and the modifications of the country borderlines.

An array of national minorities has lived and is still living on the territory of the Slovak Republic. Not each of them was attached the same importance in the twentieth century. Taking into consideration socio-political, economic and cultural viewpoints, as well as their influence on the present day, the main positions were held by the Hungarian, German, Jewish, Ruthenian-Ukrainian and Gypsy national minorities.

The sizeable Hungarian minority emerged after the state borderline between the Czechoslovak Republic and Hungary, as the two successor states after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary, had been established. According to the first post-war census in 1921, Hungarians comprised more than 21% of all inhabitants in Slovakia. The members of the Hungarian minority occupied the compact area along the southern state border, where in some districts they constituted the majority with more than 80% of inhabitants (e.g., Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely, Komárno/Komárom). The modification of the borders under Vienna Award, not in favour of Slovakia, led to the decrease in the number of Hungarians. In the second half of the twentieth century, after the exchange of Slovaks in Hungary for Hungarians in Slovakia, their number fell to approximately 10-12%.

German minority in Slovakia (Carpathian Germans) represented the remnants of the older medieval settlement. As opposed to the Sudeten Germans living in the Czech part of the country, Germans in Slovakia did not occupy the compact area. More than a half of them were concentrated on three "language islands" - the surroundings of Bratislava, the territory of Spiš/Szepes and that of Kremnica/Körmöcbánya and Nitrianske Pravno/Németpróna. The rest of the minority members were scattered around in the Slovak towns (Prešov/Eperjes, Banská Bystrica/Besztercebánya, Nitra/Nyitra, etc.). On the whole, they constituted no more than 5% of the overall amount of the inhabitants in Slovakia. Even in the districts with high concentration they represented 30% of the population at the most (the town of Bratislava/Pozsony, Kremnica, Gelnica/Gölnicbánya, Kežmarok/Késmárk). Traditionally, some of the Jews claimed German nationality, too. During the inter-war period the number of German minority was decreasing. The period between 1939 and 1945 brought about the rise not only in the number of the minority population, but also mainly in the socio-political influence of the

minority. As a result of the post-World War II situation, German minority in Slovakia almost ceased to exist.

Jews in Slovakia were perceived as an ethnic group only in the inter-war period when their presence added the colour to the atmosphere of the towns and the little towns where they were clustered. According to the statistics of the nationalities of the present population from 1921, 74 thousand Jews lived scattered around Slovakia (2,5% of the population). Taking into consideration specific relation between the concept of Jewish nationality and the concept of the Jewish confession, the real number of Jews could have been even twice as large as stated (mostly at the expense of the Hungarian minority). The biggest Jewish communities lived in Bratislava, Košice/Kassa and Michalovce/Nagymihály. Despite their pro-Hungarian orientation after the disintegration of the monarchy, Jews maintained their positions in public and economic life, which resulted in the latent anti-Semitic attitude of the Slovak majority. Therefore, the Jewish racial legislation in the Slovak State and the deportations linked with the genocide were not accompanied by any violent public protests. Emigration of Jews immediately after World War II left traces on their community. Under the Communist regime, Jews were perceived as a religious group.

Ruthenian-Ukrainian minority inhabited the compact area of north eastern Slovakia, which at present day borders on Poland and Ukraine. These mostly poor inhabitants with a very low sense of national consciousness comprised 3% of the population in Slovakia after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic. Some areas were, however, constituted by more than 70% of Ruthenians-Ukrainians (district of Michalovce, Vyšný Svidník/Felsőszvidnik). After World War II the part of the minority moved to the Soviet Union and the rest were forced to adopt Ukrainian orientation. Expressed in percentage, the minority representation fell approximately to 1%.

Specific ethnic group living in Slovakia was represented by Romanies (Gypsies). Some of them performed traditional nomadic way of life, which was receding mainly due to the intolerance of the rest of the population. Majority of Gypsies lived scattered around Slovakia (most of all in the eastern part) and for the most part they practised crafts to earn their living. Merely a fraction of them reached the average living standards and education, which affected their ethnic identity. The number of Romanies in Slovakia can be only estimated - in the late 1920s it was 62 thousand, in the late 1940s the figure raised to 100 thousand and in the late 1970s to 179 thousand Gypsy inhabitants.²

Czechs held special position within the ethnic structure of the Slovak Republic. Following the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic, Czechs were arriving to Slovakia to fill jobs in administration, education, army, and other posts which lacked the qualified domestic labour force. This process was in accord with the state policy and the ideology of the "czechoslovakism". Owing to primarily their social status, Czechs became an important element in Slovakia although they

² *Encyklopédia Slovenska, I. A-D*. [Encyclopedia of Slovakia, I. A-D] Bratislava 1977, 320-322.

comprised only approximately 3% of the population. After the autonomy had been proclaimed in 1938 and the independent Slovak State had been established in 1939, the majority of Czechs left the country. In the post-World War II period, the number of Czechs in Slovakia was approximately 1%. Concerning the linguistic and ethnical similarity and the existence of the common state, the Slovak majority did not regard Czechs as the distinctively strange element.

Chart 1.

Selected figures concerning the structure of the national minorities on the territory of Slovakia during 1918–1989³

Year	The nationality of the present population				
	Slovaks	Hungarians	Germans	Ruthenians-Ukrainians	Jews
1921	1 952 668	650 597	145 844	88 970	73 628
	65,10 %	21,70 %	4,90 %	3,00 %	2,45 %
1930	2 337 816	592 337	154 821	95 359	72 678
	70,40 %	17,79 %	4,65 %	2,86 %	2,18 %
1940	2 254 394	53 128	136 297	64 308	87 314
	84,89 %	2,00 %	5,10 %	2,42 %	3,29 %
1950	2 982 524	354 532	5 179	48 231	-
	86,60 %	10,30 %	0,10 %	1,40 %	
1961	3 560 241	518 776	6 266	35 411	-
	85,30 %	12,40 %	0,20 %	0,80 %	
1970	3 884 193	553 910	5 326	42 146	-
	85,50 %	12,20 %	0,10 %	0,90 %	
1980	4 317 008	559 490	2 918	39 260	-
	86,50 %	11,20 %	0,10 %	0,80 %	

National and ethnic minorities constituted the essential part of the relationships that were built and operating on the basis of whichever of the constitutional and political systems on the territory of Slovakia. Legislative regulations regard-

³ Based on the source: *Slovensko v Československu (1918–1939)* [Slovakia within Czechoslovakia (1918–1939)] eds. M. Zemko, V. Bystrický, Bratislava 2004, 491–544. P. Podolák, *Národnostné menšiny v Slovenskej republike z hľadiska demografického vývoja*. [National Minorities in the Slovak Republic from the Viewpoint of the Demographic Development] Martin 1998, 12.

ing their positions and rights corresponded to the socio-political and international political context of the time.⁴

The first fundamental law passed after the establishment of Czechoslovakia, on 29 February 1920, was the Constitutional Act No. 121/1920, officially called the Constitution of 1920. According to this constitution, Czechoslovakia was conceived as a democratic republic with the unitary and indivisible area. Autonomous Subcarpathian Ruthenia held specific position. According to the constitution, this part was to be granted full autonomy. However, the provision for Ruthenian autonomy was, for the political reasons, implemented not until 1938. With regard to the historical development of Czechoslovakia and its national composition, the constitution spoke of the citizens rather than nations. Speaking of the state-forming nations of Czechs and Slovaks, the ideology of the political czechoslovakism was adopted in effort to ensure their dominant position within the state. According to this ideology, Czechs and Slovaks constituted one nation. This led, to a significant extent, to the growing destabilization of the political situation in the country during the inter-war period. The culmination of the situation and the actual breakdown of the parliamentary democracy occurred after the Munich Agreement. In October 1938, the autonomy of Slovakia was proclaimed and for the first time in the history, the Slovak autonomous government was appointed (few days later, the autonomy of Subcarpathian Ruthenia was implemented). However, the period of federalization in pre-war Czecho-Slovakia lasted only a few months. In March 1939, the independent Slovak State was declared under the pressure of Nazi Germany and the Czech lands became occupied by the German army.

In spite of the real threats, the constitution and its practice during the First Czechoslovak Republic granted the minorities liberal environment in which they could live their national lives up to standard. However, the legislative regulations stated clearly that it was in the state's interest to prefer the civic principle and the policy of centralization, which should have prevented the menace of the autonomist actions.⁵ The respective provisions of the Constitution of 1920 followed in the tradition arising from the rule of law of Austria-Hungary. The regulation that surpassed the international standards of that period was codified. Protection of the national, religious and racial minorities was included in the sixth chapter. The constitution guaranteed the equality before the law and prohibited any form of the denationalisation. Due to the character of the political system of the First

⁴ For further details see: L. Orosz, "Ústavná úprava práv osôb patriacich k národnostným menšinám a etnickým skupinám v Slovenskej republike a jej komparatívna analýza," [The Constitutional Regulation Concerning the Rights of Members of the National Minorities and Ethnic Groups in the Slovak Republic and its Comparative Analysis] in *Národ a národnosti : Stav výskumu po roku 1989 a jeho perspektívy*, ed. Š. Šutaj, Prešov 2004, 44-55.

⁵ Still, the Slovak part of the republic was confronted with one significant autonomist movement. It did not refer to any particular minority, it concerned the Slovaks themselves. Some members of their political representation never accepted the idea of czechoslovakism and by legal means struggled for the Slovak autonomy.

Czechoslovakia and its approach to the national minorities, the most important apparatus for the control of the state policy and the enforcement of the minority interests was the parliamentary representation (parliament). During the First Czechoslovak Republic, the well-developed party system comprising the parties of the whole political spectrum was in operation. Members of the minorities became the representatives of various political parties of the state wide character, or they formed their own parties. Owing to their sizeable representation and the number of the candidates in elections, the minority representatives regularly won the seats in the Prague's Parliament. Still, the minority parties had much more real influence on the regional and local level, mostly in the regions with the dominant minority representation.

The issue of the minority languages and the minority education was closely linked to the status of the national minorities and their possibility to forge their national identity. In the past, several languages had been used for different language functions in Slovakia. Apart from the Slovak language, the most significant were the German and the Hungarian languages, the latter being the official language until 1918. The establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic brought about the essential change in this sphere, too. In 1920, the law, based on the idea of the czechoslovakism, thus declaring the official language to be the non-existent Czechoslovak language, came into effect. Under this law, the Slovak language was largely used in Slovakia. The minority members were allowed to use their minority language in dealings with authorities only if they constituted 20% of the population in the respective district. The legislative of the given period created relatively favourable conditions for the minorities to use their mother tongue at schools and in the cultural life. After the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic, the school policy concerning the minorities became the part of the wider complex of the issues regarded as the minority cultural policy. The implementation of this policy led to the development of the school system of the national minorities, which resulted in the increase of the number of the minority schools during the inter-war period.

Publishing of the periodicals in different languages had a long tradition in Slovakia. This was related to the multi-ethnic character of Austria-Hungary, and also Slovakia. Legislation and the cultural policy of the Czechoslovak Republic after 1918 made it possible to maintain relatively favourable conditions for the existence of the minority press. Speaking of the Hungarian minority, logically, the number of titles considerably decreased. Despite this fact, an array of the periodicals of the political parties, economic and culturo-educational magazines, and number of the local periodicals were published, reaching the whole minority. The situation was slightly different in case of the German minority. With respect to the scattered settlement, basically all the periodicals of all types had the regional character. The periodicals of the Ruthenian-Ukrainian minority virtually did not exist before 1918. Even in the inter-war period, their number was rather small and the quality was low. They were published mostly on the initiative and with the support of the Prešov Greek-Catholic diocese in the Russian language or the

Ruthenian dialect. The Jewish minority issued their periodicals in various languages according to their socio-political orientation.

During the period between the wars, the radio broadcast, with the scope for the national minorities, was started. The first was the Hungarian broadcasting transmitted from Košice in 1928, and after a short time from Bratislava. The broadcasting was predominantly culturo-educational. Significant role was played by the propaganda aimed at the elimination of the influence of the Hungarian propaganda in Slovakia. Regular broadcasting for Ruthenians-Ukrainians started in 1934.

Changes on the political map of Central Europe on the turn of the years 1938 and 1939 affected also Slovakia. At first, its territory was locked under the Vienna Award resolutions, which not only changed the borders of the states, but also had a considerable effect on the ethnical relations. After a short time, in March 1939, the Slovak State came into existence as one of the outcomes of Hitler's policy, this being necessarily reflected in the country's political system. The Slovak State (the Slovak Republic, as it was officially called after the adoption of the constitution) developed gradually into the political system in which all its elements were dependant on one person - the president, the Fuhrer. According to the Constitutional Act No. 185 about the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, passed on 21 July in 1939, the territory of the state was unitary and indivisible. After the statehood had been acquired, the Slovak majority expected predominantly the enhancement of its status in all spheres of life. Therefore, the constitution codified the principle of the Christian national state. Two power-political wings of the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party struggled for the state's character. Although the Constitution of 1939 maintained relatively high standard of the regulations concerning the status of the minorities, its analysing is pointless, since the implementation of the laws during the existence of the Slovak State diverted from the legal norms existing on paper. Often, the implementing regulations of the laws were absent. The laws were arbitrarily violated or deliberately misinterpreted, the best example of which is the solution of the so-called Jewish issue.

Political system of the Slovak State was totalitarian. Despite this fact, it acknowledged the existence of the minority parties. The German and Hungarian minorities were allowed to establish their own political parties. Although political activities of Ruthenians-Ukrainians were tolerated, they were not allowed to form their own party. They could become the members of the only legal political party of the Slovak majority. During the existence of the Slovak State, the minorities were represented in the Slovak National Assembly. This authority, however, did not fulfil the function stipulated by the constitution. The German minority occupied the privileged position among the minorities. Besides the Office for Prime Minister, the Secretariat of State for the Matters Concerning German Ethnic Group in Slovakia was in operation. Thus, the approach to the minorities in Slovakia during the years 1939-1945 can be characterized as differential. While the German minority constituted the privileged class demanding the dominant status in the socio-political life, it was preferred that Ruthenians-Ukrainians assimilate with Slovaks. Hungarians and Czechs moved, to a large extent, out from the

country. The development of the Jew and Gypsy minorities led through their isolation up to their physical elimination.

The short existence of the Slovak State and the peculiar conditions of the period between 1939 and 1945 did not provide for the systematic approach to the solution to the linguistic issue, which was very closely associated with the minority policy of the people's regime. Besides the political rights in the political sphere, the Hungarian and Ruthenian-Ukrainian minorities had to struggle for their language rights, too. The national school system was the object of the legislative regulation also during the era of the Slovak State. The implementation of the law, adopted in 1940, was under the totalitarian regime postponed until the year 1943. In the meantime, however, the minority schools were regularly giving the lessons. The periodicals and the radio broadcasting of the Hungarian, German and Ruthenian-Ukrainian minorities during the Slovak State continued, although they were, to a certain extent, reduced. The content of the broadcasting was censored, as in case of the Slovak media.

Under the pressure of its own discrediting and the war events, the totalitarian regime with the fascist character collapsed. The reestablishment of Czechoslovakia was associated with the hope for the national emancipation in the conditions of the democratic and federative state organization. This hope was marred by the integration of Czechoslovakia into the Eastern Block.

The events of World War II led to the changes in the ethnic structure of the Slovak society. The German and Jewish minorities virtually ceased to exist, following the reestablishment of Czechoslovakia the exchange of minorities between Czechoslovakia and Hungary was carried out, etc. Moreover, the integration of the country into the Eastern Block was reflected in the relationship of the state and the ruling majority to the minorities. Based on the ruling ideology, it was stated that the antagonism toward the ethnic interests in the period of capitalism was replaced by the cooperation in building of the socialist society. The suppression and masking of the disputes among the ethnic groups became the fundamental concern not only due to the Communist ideology of the country, but also because the ethnic conflicts represented the potential threat to the relations among the countries constituting one power block. Though the Communist regime created liberal environment for the chosen minorities to live in, it did not provide the scope to solve some of the problems that came into light only after the fall of this regime.

After the Communist takeover at the beginning of 1948, the rule of law called for recodification. The Ninth-of-May Constitution of 1948 declared Czechoslovakia to be the "people's democracy" and it stipulated the building of socialism to be the main course of further development. According to the constitution, Czechoslovakia was a unitary state of two Slavic nations possessing equal rights - the Czechs and the Slovaks. (Art. 2) In spite of this fact, in Chapter 5, merely the Slovak national authorities, exercising the legislative, executive and governmental power in Slovakia, were mentioned. The analogous authorities did not exist in the Czech part of the country. Thus the constitution enshrined the asymmetric model of the governmental structure. The principle of centralism was strength-

ened, which resulted in the adoption of the 1960 Constitution. The ethnic issue was to be resolved on the basis of the ideological principles of Marxism-Leninism. Instead of being systematically solved, this issue was rather disregarded in the public life and discussion. The Ninth-of-May Constitution of 1948 was the only document of its kind in the modern history of Slovakia, which did not discuss the rights of the national minorities. This was the consequence of coping with the outcomes of World War II, which in the conditions of the re-established Czechoslovakia meant predominantly coping with the issues concerning the German and Hungarian minorities.

The Constitution of 1960, promulgated on 11 July that year, declared the victory of socialism in the country, and the country adopted the new name, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR). Czechoslovakia was described as a unitary state of two fraternal nations possessing equal rights - the Czechs and the Slovaks (Art. 1). Although the 1960 Constitution, which in Article 4 enshrined the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, retained the Slovak authorities, it severely limited their competences (Art. 6). The Constitution of 1960 issued the regulation regarding the non-standard situation in the minority legislation. The citizens of three minority groups - Hungarians, Ukrainians and Polish - were, with state approval, ensured all means for education in their mother tongue and for their cultural development.

In the course of 1968, the country underwent the process of reformation. During this process, the issues regarding the relationship between Czechs and Slovaks and the possible changes in the governmental structure of the country began to be discussed more openly. After a short time, the Constitutional Law of Czechoslovak Federation was drafted and consequently adopted in 1968. In Article 1, the law stipulated that the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was composed of two equal fraternal nations - the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. The implementation of this law was negatively affected by the intervention of the Warsaw Pact armies. In the following period of normalization, the provisions of the law were not applied at all, or they were modified by other constitutional acts that extended the scope of the competences of the federal ministries. The Constitutional Law of Czechoslovak Federation from 1968 and its regulations represented the basic legislative framework until the year 1989. The operation of this model of the governmental structure was entirely dependant on the existence of the Communist regime, which could anytime in case of need use its broad power-repressive apparatus in order to set the course of the discussion concerning the questions of the state organization.

The last regulation concerning the minority legislation, carried out before November 1989, was the Constitutional Law No. 144 which stipulated that "the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, as a common state of the Czech and Slovak nations, and other nations living in its territory, under the principles of the socialist democracy and internationalism, grants the Hungarian, German, Polish and Ukrainian (Ruthenian) minority groups all means for the universal development." This regulation was specified in the subsequent articles, in which the at-

mosphere of the reform movement of the Prague Spring in 1968, with its positives and limitations, was reflected.

The Gypsy issue was tackled by the legislation only to a minimal extent after 1948. This minority group was for a long time confronted with the attempts at the forced social and ethnic assimilation (approximately until 1970), or the social and cultural integration (after 1970), without any particular interest of the Communist regime to study this minority group systematically.⁶

The outcomes of World War II and the establishment of the Soviet Block caused the retreat of the language issue, no more regulated by any particular language act. The Constitution of 1960 guaranteed the equality of rights and duties of the citizens regardless of nationality. The Constitutional Act of 1968 granted the Hungarian, German, Polish and Ukrainian minorities the language rights in education, in dealings with the authorities, in the territories inhabited by the minority group and in the press. Under socialism, the schools for the Hungarian and Ukrainian minorities were in operation. These were the inseparable part of the educational system of that time. There were three types of the schools for the national minorities – those teaching in minority language, bilingual schools and the schools teaching the mother tongue and literature.

After the liberation, the German press stopped to be issued. Older Hungarian and Ruthenian-Ukrainian periodicals also ceased to exist, but they were replaced with the new titles, the contents of which were associated with the Communist regime. In the pro-regime atmosphere, the Hungarian and Ruthenian radio broadcasting was reinstated. The television broadcast was bilingual – in the Czech and Slovak languages.

We can hardly speak about the continuity or the basic pattern of the state minority policy for the years 1918–1989. Throughout this period, basically incompatible political systems altered in Slovakia. Each of those systems tried to solve the minority issue taking its own interests, needs, ideological concepts and respective circumstances of the period into consideration. However, no political system settled the minority issue in a way and under such conditions, so that it could become the basis for the minority policy of the present Slovak Republic. The alteration of the political systems and frequent changes of the conditions in Central Europe were negatively reflected in the possible ways of developing of the national identity, and in the inter-ethnic relationships. Regarding this, the most negative element appears to be the lack of democracy and the absence of continuity in the historical development, which affected not only the survival, assimilation or the elimination of the minorities, but mostly the relations among the minorities and majorities marked by (real or potential) conflicts.

Translated by KATARÍNA PEKÁROVÁ

⁶ A. Jurová, "Rómovia na Slovensku," [Roma People in Slovakia] in *Národ a národnosti : Stav výskumu po roku 1989 a jeho perspektívy*, ed. Š. Šutaj, Prešov 2004, 259–260.