

THE CRISIS IN KOSOVO AND THE SLOVAK PUBLIC: A LESSON ON INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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Although several months have gone since NATO's spring 1999 intervention against The Yugoslav Federal Republic, this issue should not be put aside. There are several reasons for this, two major ones being the slowly fading vision of a multi-ethnic coexistence in Kosovo, and the political developments in Yugoslavia. Even when President Milošević had been out voted in the fall 2000 elections, the situation of post-Milošević Yugoslavia still remains more than complicated. Kosovo is a topical issue also from the perspective of the internal political development in Slovakia, in particular from the viewpoint of seeking general public consensus on supporting Slovakia's membership in NATO. The opponents of the NATO intervention have yet to be convinced (has anybody tried at all?), their arguments and negative stereotypes of the NATO perception have not been dispelled, but rather only overshadowed and pushed into the background what only helps to further spread the seeds of doubt and uncertainty. Should a similar situation occur again, the reaction of citizens might be the same. The crisis in Kosovo, in fact, has proved what the surveys indicated even before: the Euro-Atlantic orientations of the Slovak public are rather declarative, lacking a more profound reasoning and, therefore, is easily influenced by the ever-changing political climate. In terms of supporting and trusting Euro-Atlantic institutions in the 90's, the *situation factor* turned out to be the most decisive.¹

The foreign policy – the Slovak contexts

Foreign policy issues generally do not rank as one of the areas that catch the general public's attention and the opinions formed by the public in this field are usually based on relatively poor information base and a lack of knowledge. Polls conducted in a number of states have repeatedly proved this. In Slovakia the lack of interest and knowledge in foreign policy is even greater than elsewhere due to a number of contributing factors. Let's review some of the most relevant ones, which have significantly affected public foreign policy awareness during the last decade.

1. Immediately after the collapse of the communist regime, as well as three years later, when the independence of Slovakia was established, Slovakia had faced historical shortcomings in all of the four essential fields of foreign policy: personalities, elites, conceptions and institutions.² The citizens had no historical experience of living in an independent state, creating its own foreign policy by defining and enforcing its own objectives and goals. The state institutions and the diplomacy, as well as institutions providing political analyses, journals and other resources facilitating discussions of foreign policy, had all begun to be established after 1993. The confusion of public opinion, decreased awareness of Slovakia's geo-political status, insufficient knowledge of international politics and

1 Veľšic, M.: Zmena režimu na Slovensku v perspektíve verejnej mienky. (The Change of the System in Slovakia in a Perspective of Public Opinion). Dissertation thesis, FIF UK, Bratislava 2000, pp. 215-216.

2 Lukáč, P.: 10 rokov po... Ako bolo Slovensko pripravené na zmeny roku 1989 v oblasti zahraničnej politiky (10 Years after... How was Slovakia Prepared for the 1989 Changes in the Area of Foreign Policy) In: OS 2000, No. 1, p. 6.

relatively insufficient level of information³ and awareness were nothing but a logical implication of this status.

2. The “social costs” of the economical transformation. The overall decrease in the standard of living, deeply felt social hardship, and other problems associated with the society’s tumultuous transition from “communism” to democracy had ranked foreign policy issues among the lowest priorities of Slovaks as a whole.

3. Several surveys had indicated, that the citizens’ interest in foreign policy was closely related to their interest in Western culture. However, even in this regard, the Slovak community was only slowly beginning to “open up”. According to polls conducted from 1992 through March 2000, the number of people who did not speak any foreign language, decreased from 76% to 67%. Similarly the number of those, who had not yet visited any developed Western country for more than one week, decreased from 77% to 68%.⁴ It can be proved that the closeness, lack of contact with the world and other cultures strengthen unclear and negative attitudes towards the integration. On contrary, people who are more open and aware are more likely to support the integration.

These preconditions are even fortified by poor foreign policy discourse that is not sufficiently promoted by the media, politicians or any other public actors. Despite a certain degree of progress, the international policy debates have developed very slowly, since taking a stance on international issues represents an insurmountable problem for the majority of Slovak politicians.

NATO and the Security Policy of the 90’s as viewed by Slovak citizens.

The two fundamental integration goals of the Slovak Republic - membership in NATO and the EU – are perceived differently by the public since the early 90’s. There is greater trust among the population and more supporters than opponents as far as membership in the EU is concerned. Whereas, on the other hand, the position towards NATO membership has gone through a dramatic change during the 90’s. In the early 90’s there was a relatively low differentiation of opinions. The majority of the population had failed to take a strong stance, one way or the other, on issues of foreign policy. In April 1992 and March 1993, 45% and 34% of the population respectively had unclear opinions on membership in NATO.

In addition, the general opinion, formed shortly after the creation of an independent Slovakia, was that the country should rely on itself rather than join different alliances and pacts.⁵ At the time, one third of the overall Slovak population supported a certain “own way”, while one fourth of Slovaks preferred the “western direction”, which meant joining the European Community and NATO.

During the first year of the independent Slovak Republic, the geopolitical position of the newly established state began to take a more realistic view on matters of foreign policy. Gradually, trust in international institutions such as the EU, NATO and the International Monetary Fund began to increase. Although, in early 1993, Slovaks still regarded NATO with a great amount of skepticism and distrust, by October the number of supporters had significantly increased. Surveys showed that 45% and 55% of Slovak citizens supported NATO and EU membership respectively. The year of 1993 could, therefore, be considered a period of accelerated learning by the Slovak public in terms of foreign policy. A number of factors contributed to this phenomenon. The general public had become aware of the fact that

³ We refer to the Slovak-Czech comparative research conducted in autumn 1994. Only 34% of the adult Slovak population was informed about the referendum outcomes in Austria on the EU accession. In the Czech Republic it was 66%. See: *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska – december 1994*. (Current Problems of Slovakia - December 1994) FOCUS Bratislava 1994.

⁴ See Bútorová, Z. –Bútor, M.: *Slovakia and the World*. In: Bútorová, Z. (ed.): *Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia*, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava 1998, p. 175.

⁵ *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska – Október 1993*. (Current problems of Slovakia - October 1993). Focus, Bratislava 1993, p. 71.

Slovakia has to assume responsibility for its own foreign policy, since there was no one else to blame. When faced with the reality of such responsibility, which had been thrust upon them by the need to establish an independent foreign policy, Slovakia began to see its western direction as a more attractive alternative, compared to the dubious visions of a possible „third way“, or a way leading towards Russia⁶.

During the next few months, public opinion on the country's foreign policy began to split. Moreover, it had become clear, that the public's views had crystallized as the most distinctive feature of political culture. The distinction between the pro-integration and pro-transformation views on the one side and the anti-integration and anti-transformation on the other were identical with the deep cultural cleavage. Analyzing the value orientations the sociologist V. Krivý identified pro/anti-westernism as one of the ten dimensions, characterized by several indicators.⁷ Data analyzed from October 1997 demonstrated that pro- versus anti-westernism positions, as well as authoritarianism versus non-authoritarianism (that means liberal political culture), strongly differentiated Slovak society. At the same time, the anti-westernism position is highly correlated with authoritarianism and ethnic intolerance, and is one of the five value orientations dimension indicated anti-democratic features. According to the scores measuring pro/anti-westernism position the supporters of the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) and the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) were placed on one side, while the opposite end of the scale was occupied by the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), which represented the strongest anti-westernism position, followed by the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS). In other words, citizens representing extreme anti-west positions and extreme authoritarian features were concentrated among the supporters of the parties forming the coalition government from 1994 through 1998.⁸

During the former-coalition government's hold on power, the Slovak path to integration diverged from the Central-European integration model. In these years important decisions were made: three former Warsaw Pact members were invited to join NATO, and the first group of candidates to the EU had started accession negotiations. Slovakia had met all the preconditions to be in this „front-runner group“, however, the policy of Prime Minister Mečiar's Cabinet had disqualified Slovakia from both processes. In July 1997, the NATO summit in Madrid recommended not to include Slovakia among the first wave of NATO enlargement. In December 1997, the summit of the EU relegated Slovakia to a second, slower track toward EU membership.

Public trust and confidence in the EU and NATO, as well as support for the potential membership of Slovakia in these institutions was on the increase. This trend culminated with the failure of referendum on both direct presidential election and Slovak membership in NATO. According to researches conducted at the time, had the referendum taken place, the results, as to NATO membership, would have been unambiguously positive. In October 1997, 52% of the Slovak population supported, and 32% opposed NATO membership. While the majority of SDK and SMK members supported the integration process, the ratio of supporters and opponents from amongst SDK members had been quite balanced (48% to 46%).⁹

6 In December 1995, referring to the survey question: „What kind of foreign policy do you consider the most appropriate in terms of further successful development of Slovakia?“, 50% of respondents indicated integration to the EU and NATO membership, 27% preferred an individual way of development. See: Aktuálne problémy Slovenska na prelome rokov 1995-96. (Current Problems of Slovakia at the Verge of 1995-96). FOCUS, Bratislava 1996.

7 See: Krivý, V.: Hodnotové orientácie na Slovensku – skupinové portréty. Pracovný zošit. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, Bratislava 1998.

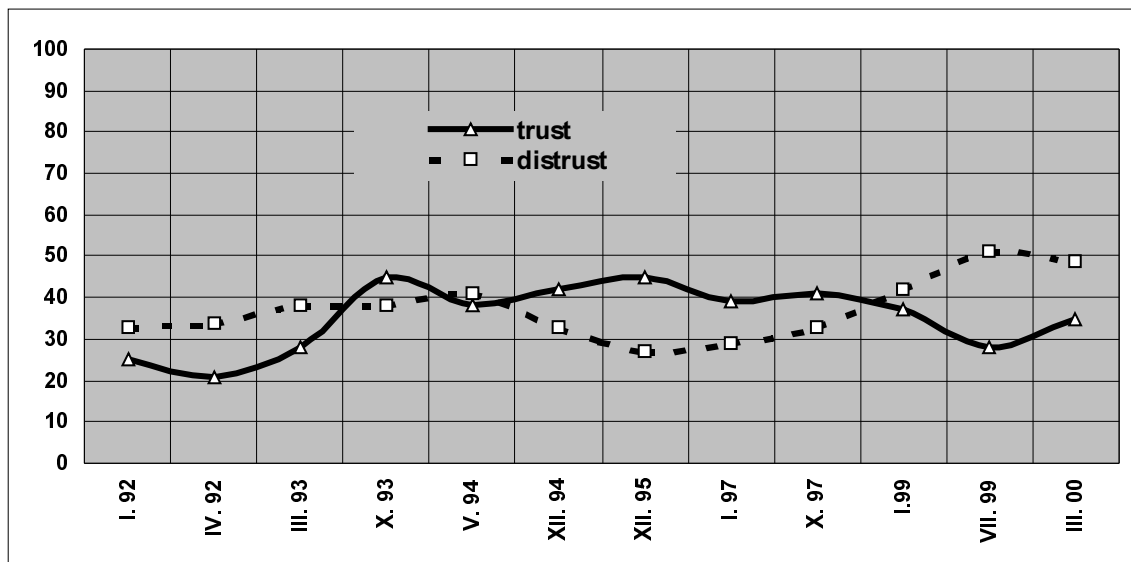
8 Ibid: p. 26.

9 Bútorová, Z.- Bútorá, M.: Slovakia and the World. In: Bútorová, Z. (ed.): Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava 1998, p. 181.

After the 1998 elections, the public opinion on the process of integration had paradoxically changed. While a large percent of the population saw an increase in Slovakia's chances for integration, the overall number of supporters for Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO had decreased. This shift in public opinion was due largely to the fact that the HZDS and SNS representatives, after becoming opposition political parties, begun to question the purposefulness of Slovakia's integration in Euro-Atlantic structures, and thus their supporters reacted by opposing both processes of Slovakia's integration. For example, in January 1999, prior to the crisis in Kosovo, the number of those in support of Slovakia's NATO membership from amongst HZDS voters decreased from 46% (in April, 1998) to 19%. Similarly, the rates of SNS voters also decreased from 41% to 27%.¹⁰

This process was further affected by the crisis in Kosovo, the second most significant factor leading to a decrease in support for Slovakia's membership in NATO.

Graph 1 Development of the trust in NATO



Sources: CSA, FOCUS, IVO, SÚ SAV

Opinions on the crisis in Kosovo and the NATO's air campaign

None of international political events of the 90's influenced the internal political life of Slovakia as significantly as the crisis in Kosovo did. As far as public opinion is concerned, the crisis exposed a number of weaknesses that had, for some time, existed in the media, as well as in the preparedness of politicians to publicly justify political actions, which were not supported by the majority of the population. The media in Slovakia (in particular, the electronic ones which are most influential) presented and interpreted NATO's attacks in a rather negative light. The consequences of the military intervention had frequently been presented without a sufficient explanation of its purpose and objectives. In addition, the media failed to provide profound analysis of the background and issues related to the conflict that had culminating several months before the NATO air attack. The MEMO 98, an independent

10 Bútorová, Z.-Gyárfášová, O. -Veštic, M.: Public opinion. In: Mesežnikov, G. – Ivantyšin, M., - Nicholson, T. (eds.) 1999: Slovakia 1998 - 1999. A Global Report on the State of the Society. Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava 1999, p.154.

apolitical organization, conducted a monitoring of the electronic media from March 22 through June 6, 1999 with the goal of establishing how much time the media was devoting to the Kosovo crisis. The most frequently discussed issue was NATO and its air attack, while 67% of all remarks were neutral, 24% negative and only the remaining portion could be considered positive. The Kosovar Albanians were, for the most part, presented in a positive light, but discussed less frequently than the NATO air campaign. Also, the only information on the Kosovo refugees and their situation, had been provided almost exclusively only by the members of the Slovak cabinet.¹¹

G. Mesežnikov, a political analyst, had summarized a range of additional factors that may have been useful to opponents of NATO's military intervention. At the same time he had emphasized insufficient information on the situation in Kosovo, reasons for the crisis in the relevant part of Yugoslavia and on the motives of NATO and its resolution to engage military forces against Belgrade, as well as the diversity of the coalition parties's positions.¹²

The Slovak government had made a quick decision to open Slovak air space to NATO's air force. However, it had not been able to publicly justify it in a timely and convincing manner¹³. The opposition parties (the Slovak National Party and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) took full advantage of the ground gained within the vacant communication space and launched its intense and emotional anti-American and anti-West campaign.

The results of the first published poll about the Slovak public's position on NATO air attacks was stunning: 28% of respondents considered NATO's air attacks as either fully or partially legitimate; 65% of them expressed an opposing view¹⁴. Considering the ongoing political and media debate on the issue, any other result would have been rather surprising. Support for NATO's air campaign was to be found mostly among young people from 18-24, people with a university education, Hungarian minority citizens and people living in the Bratislava region. The opposition to NATO's military intervention, on the other hand, was made up of people between the ages of 35-44, people with only an elementary and secondary level education, and those living in the Trenčín and Banská Bystrica regions. The made up of the different public opinion stances was closely related to the positions taken by the individual political parties.

11 Správa o monitoringu informácií v súvisiacich s konfliktom v Kosove vo vybraných elektronických médiách, (Report of monitoring the information related to Kosovo in selected electronic media), 1999. MEMO 98. <http://www.memo98.sk>.

12 Mesežnikov, G.: Kosovská kríza a slovenská spoločnosť. (The crisis in Kosovo and the Slovak Society) In: Dilema 2000, No.3, pp. 13-15.

13 It is worth mentioning, that the stance of the Cabinet had not been unambiguous either. Not all Ministers voted in favor of the resolution supporting air attacks and opening the country's air space: the Minister of Justice, Ján Čarnogurský (KDH) and the Minister of Agriculture, Pavel Koncoš (SDL) abstained from voting. The SDL recommended that its cabinet members not support permitting NATO overflights. Despite of that, P. Kanis, Minister of Defense and B. Schmögnerová, Minister of Finance voted for the Cabinet's Resolution. (see Mesežnikov 2000:15)

14 In April 16-18, the GfK Agency conducted a quick telephone research of the Institute for Public Affairs on a representative sample of 500 respondents.

Table 1

„To what extent do you consider the NATO air attacks against military targets in Yugoslavia legitimate?“ (according to the parties adherents, in percent)

	Fully legitimate	or rather	Fully illegitimate	or rather	I don't know
Population of SR 28			65		7
Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK)	67		33		0
Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK)	58		37		5
Party of the Democratic Left (SDL)	40		60		0
Party of Civic Understanding (SOP)	24		65		11
Slovak National Party (SNS)	13		79		8
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	6		92		2

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, April 1999

The research also indicated a considerable inconsistency in public opinion. The majority of Slovaks (68%) admitted that president Milošević was responsible for the tragedy, which had befallen Albanians in Kosovo, however, they disagreed with the idea that military solution should be considered in the event that all diplomatic efforts failed. The respondents who expressed this inconsistent opinion were mostly amongst the SOP and SDL supporters. On the other end, 25% of Slovaks, mostly supporters of SMK and SDK, criticized Milošević's policy and supported the NATO's intervention¹⁵. Almost one fifth of the Slovak population not only rejected NATO's intervention, but also did not hold Milošević personally responsible for the crisis. Such positions were most frequently been taken by HZDS and SNS adherents.

As previously mentioned, information detailing the reasons for the crisis in Kosovo played a significant role in shaping public opinion. This notion was proven by a survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute (ÚVVM), which found that „...30 % of respondents, who had claimed to have sufficient information, supported NATO's military operations, while only 11% of those, who admitted having insufficient information, supported NATO's action in Yugoslavia“.¹⁶

The attitude of Slovaks towards NATO air attacks was also reflected in their rather critical reaction to the Cabinet's resolution allowing NATO's air forces to cross the Slovak air space. 32% of the respondents agreed while 64% disagreed with the Cabinet's resolution. The

¹⁵ According to the research conducted by ÚVVM in the ŠÚ SR at the turn of April and May, 1999, 22% of Slovak respondents supported and 69% opposed the NATO's military intervention in Yugoslavia. See: Názory-Opinions. Informačný bulletin ÚVVM at ŠÚ SR, 1/1999, p. 31.

¹⁶ See: Názory - Opinions. Informačný bulletin ÚVVM at ŠÚ SR, 1/1999, p. 33.

majority of the Slovaks had distanced themselves from the official stance that the government was taking on the Kosovo crisis. Surprisingly, however, the support for the ruling coalition had managed to slightly increase.¹⁷ This may indicate that a significant block of coalition government supporters, while not sharing the Cabinet's stance towards the situation in Kosovo, was still willing to place their confidence and trust in the coalition government.

The crisis in Kosovo had a significant impact on the public trust in NATO, as well as support of Slovakia's NATO membership. The results of ongoing public opinion polls indicated the negative toll that crisis in Kosovo was taking. For instance, according to the IVO research conducted July 1999, the number of those who supported NATO membership decreased to 35%, while the number of opponents increased to 53%.¹⁸ The poll also monitored the changes in public opinion. As presented in Table 2, 2 to 16% of respondents claimed they had originally supported Slovakia's NATO membership, however, due to the war in the Balkans they had changed their position and now oppose Slovak membership in NATO. Similar position changes had occurred amongst the supporters of all political parties, especially within the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP). The majority of those who supported the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) and the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) were in favor of Slovak membership in NATO regardless of the crisis in Kosovo.

¹⁷ Bútorová-Gyárfášová-Velšic, 1999, p. 156.

¹⁸ Representative survey made on a sample of 1045 adults by face-to-face dialogues, conducted by the FOCUS agency from June 2 to June 8, 1999.

Table 2

„The NATO air attacks against Yugoslavia are going on for several weeks. Has the conflict on the Balkans influenced your opinion on Slovak membership in NATO? If yes, then what impact did it have?“ (in percent)

	I had supported Slovakia's NATO membership before, however, now I believe that Slovakia should not become a NATO member.	I had opposed Slovakia's NATO membership before, however, now I believe the Slovakia should become a NATO member.	The conflict has not influenced my original stance. I support Slovakia's NATO membership regardless of the conflict.	The conflict has not influenced my original stance. I oppose Slovakia's NATO membership regardless of the conflict.	I do not know, I have not thought about this issue.
Population of SR	16	2	27	33	22
Political preferences					
SMK	14	1	62	5	17
SDK	16	4	56	13	12
SOP	20	2	33	28	18
SDE	16	2	28	32	23
SNS	24	0	15	52	8
HZDS	18	2	4	57	20
Education					
Elementary	15	2	20	33	30
Vocational	18	2	23	36	22
Secondary	15	2	32	32	18
University	19	0	47	31	3

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, June 1999

A survey conducted in early June 1999, that is, during NATO's air attacks, provided additional information regarding Slovak public opinion. The majority of Slovaks (53%) viewed the conflict between Milošević and the Albanians in Kosovo as an internal issue concerning Yugoslavia and, therefore, they viewed any external intervention as illegitimate. Only 30% of respondents took an opposing position. Almost one fifth of all respondents did not take any position either way with regards to the situation in Kosovo. Except for supporters of the Slovak Democratic Coalition and the Hungarian Coalition Party, supporters of other political parties seemed to follow the philosophy of „Mind your own business!“ As far as the level of education was concerned, all but university-educated people followed the same attitude. The above facts indicate that the majority of Slovaks did not view the crisis in Kosovo as an issue to be addressed by the world community. This group of Slovaks did not view the intervention as an attempt by the international community to nurture and protect human rights in different parts of the world. Despite what was going on in Kosovo, they continued to maintain a position of just “staying out”. The point should be made, however, that the debate on whether or not to intervene on humanitarian grounds, in which politicians,

intellectuals, writers and lawyers from Western-European countries had long been engaged, had been almost non-existent in Slovakia. What debate there was, eventually turned into a polarizing political conflict between the supporters and opponents of the NATO's military intervention.

Kosovo „a year after“

In the second half of 1999, the Kosovo crisis and Slovakia's NATO membership had almost disappeared from the public discourse. The opposition used a rather complicated post-intervention development in Kosovo to prove the truth of those, who had disagreed with the military intervention („won war, but lost peace“). Another “popular” argument of the opposition was that Washington did not sufficiently reward the courageous efforts made by the Slovak Cabinet on behalf of NATO.

While other parties were busy spinning and manipulating the events in post-crisis Kosovo, the Cabinet remained mostly silent. Finally, in the beginning of 2000, the Cabinet adopted and began to implement its information policy under the title „The concept of improving public information on Slovakia's NATO membership”.

NATO's military intervention against the former Yugoslavia is being viewed rather negatively even “a year after” and, the related political positions still differ significantly, just like they did during the conflict.

Table 3

„Do you consider NATO’s military intervention against Yugoslavia legitimate or not?“ (according to the parties adherents, in percent)

	Fully + rather legitimate	Fully + rather legitimate
Population of SR	22	65
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ)	58	29
Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK)	49	29
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	36	47
Party of Civic Understanding (SOP)	28	56
Party of the Democratic Left (SDL)	28	56
Smer	19	75
Slovak National Party (SNS)	7	86
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	5	87

Note: The rest of 100 % comprises responses „I don’t know“.

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, March 2000

The opinion of Slovaks on foreign policy issues could be characterized as one opposed to the interventions in general. There were three frequently discussed interventions on the recent international political scene (of course, with very different background) – NATO’s intervention against Yugoslavia, Russia’s intervention in Chechnya, and the EU’s sanctions against Austria in February 2000, after it had established a cabinet including members of Haider’s Party. In all three cases, the number of supporters was lower than the number of opponents. This was most obvious in case of the Russian intervention (15 : 65 from 100%), with similar results in the case of the NATO intervention (22 : 65), and the least obvious in case of the EU sanctions against Austria (22 : 43, while 35% of respondents had not been able to address this issue at all). So the prevailing pattern of thinking seems to be one of „Mind your own business!“ Interestingly enough, the supporters and opponents of military interventions in Yugoslavia and Chechnya are usually the same. It means, that most probably those, who had opposed NATO’s military intervention in Yugoslavia were critical towards the intervention in Chechnya, too. There is a little likelihood that those who had opposed NATO’s military intervention in Yugoslavia would support the Russian intervention in Chechnya.¹⁹

A Look Out

The following review should not be considered an exhaustive analysis of national discourses nor the political actors, but rather as a brief outline of public reactions in other countries to the Kosovo crisis.

In the Czech Republic, which became a member of NATO shortly before the start of the military intervention, the public opinion had been quite restrained. In mid April 56% of the population opposed, while one third supported the NATO attack. In early May, the number of opponents slightly decreased (48%), but later increased to as high as to 66%. The crisis in Kosovo had a significant impact on how the Czechs viewed their new membership in NATO. The number of those who opposed NATO membership had increased from 29%, at the time of admission, to 38% (in mid April).²⁰ The other two new member states did not

¹⁹ Krivý-Gyárfášová-Velšic, 2000.

²⁰ Budou Češi bojovat v Kosovu? – Will the Czechs fight in Kosovo? In: Lidové noviny, 27.4.1999

Dve třetiny proti bombardování. - Two-thirds against the bombing. Právo, 19.5.1999

record a similar decrease. In Poland due to the historical reasons, the support for NATO has never gone under 70% and in Hungary, due to the closeness to the crises region, the support for the campaign as well as for NATO membership did not significantly decrease.

In the member states the unambiguous stance of governments, effective communication between the politicians and the public, a more professional media, which provided detailed and in-depth information on the background of the crisis in Kosovo, resulted in the support of the majority of citizens. Most Americans also supported NATO's attacks. According to research conducted in early April 68% of Americans supported the NATO air attack, and 55% would even support the potential deployment of land forces. In Britain, 70% of the people supported the unambiguous stance of British Labor Party. The positions of the Netherlands and Denmark were similar.

However, in Germany a very unique situation was unfolding. The crisis in Kosovo was a historical milestone for German diplomacy. The Bundeswehr was engaged in a military operation in the Balkans, for the first time, since WW II. Kosovo had also become a challenge for the red-green coalition, which resulted in the Green party's divergence from the official government position. Research also confirmed the expected major differences between former Eastern Germany and the Western half of the country. The majority of citizens from the former German Democratic Republic opposed the military intervention, while 69% of population in Western Germany supported the NATO's attacks.

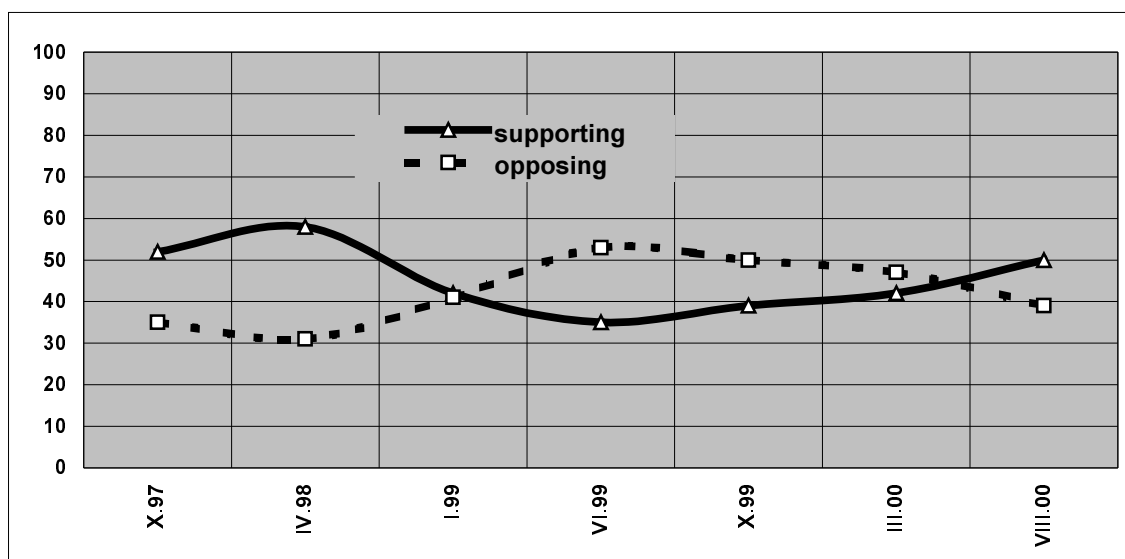
The situation was a little different in Italy and Belgium where public opinion wavered between pro and con. The French public supported its Cabinet's policy in support of NATO, as defined by President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, as well as from the representatives of the different political blocks.

It came as no surprise that Greece was taking the most critical stance of all NATO members. According to surveys, 96% of Greeks opposed NATO's resolution and, in Athens there were daily protest, meetings and demonstration.

Kosovo as a major factor influencing Slovakia's NATO membership

A significant decrease in the number of supporters of Slovakia's proposed NATO membership in the spring of 1999 was followed by a gradual increase in the second half of the year. By August 2000, the number of those who supported NATO membership had reached the magical limit of 50%, and thus significantly exceeded the number of opponents.

Graph 2 Support of Slovakia's NATO membership - development between 1997 and 2000



Source: Institute for Public Affairs

The majority of younger people with a higher level of education support Slovakia joining in either the EU or NATO. However, differing opinions on the subject are closely tied to party affiliation. Those who support the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK), the Slovak Christian Democratic Union (SDKÚ) and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) are the ones most in favor of Slovak membership in NATO. The support for Slovakia's integration is a bit lower amongst the supporters of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), Smer and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), however, supporters still outnumber. The majority of both HZDS and SNS supporters oppose the process of integration. Since June 1999, the number of those supporting Slovak membership in NATO has increased, across party lines, except in the case of the SDL. Despite a significant increase in support from amongst the voters of the opposition parties, the percentage of those who oppose integration still prevails.

A gradual shift in opinion regarding potential Slovak membership in NATO is, most likely, due to more efficient information being provided by both politicians and the media, and also because the negative consequences of the crisis in Kosovo have slowly begun to fade away. In the case of HZDS supporters, it may be a reaction to the party's official foreign policy stance, announced during the HZDS Congress in March 2000, in which it supported Slovakia's integration efforts.

Table 4

„Do you support Slovak membership in NATO?“
(according to the parties adherents, in percent)

	June 1999		August 2000	
	Yes, rather yes	No, rather no	Yes, rather yes	No, rather no
Population of SR	35	53	50	39
SDK (SDKÚ)	70	24	87	11
SMK	72	17	82	11
SOP	46	47	67	28

Smer	-	-	56	39
KDH	-	-	53	29
SDL	45	48	47	44
SNS	17	78	30	63
HZDS	8	85	27	63

Note: The rest of 100 % comprises responses „I don't know“.

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, June 1999 and August 2000

Opinions of the politicians are crucial

The public view on matters of foreign policy more than on any other political issue, is most significantly affected by the positions of key political figures or leaders of political parties. Bipartisan efforts by the most prominent of political figures could help do dissolve the divisive differences amongst the public and, eventually unify public opinion.

An in-depth survey of how various members of the parliamentary political parties viewed NATO was conducted in autumn 1999 through a series of detailed interviews.²¹ The results indicated that the majority of the Slovak political elite perceives NATO in a positive light. The idea that NATO is an organization defending the values of the democratic western world still prevails. The survey indicated a certain amount of ambivalence within HZDS's position on NATO. HZDS had officially declared its support for Slovak membership in NATO; however, the majority of its voters opposed this goal. HZDS was eventually forced to admit the importance of joining NATO and declared that there was no other alternative. This admission caused a number of HZDS members to personally and emotionally distance themselves from the issue. The following quotation from a HZDS parliamentarian could serve as an example of this distancing: „*As I have said in the Parliament, I have no opinion on this issue, I have no comments to make about that organization (NATO) either ...Of course, I accept that, since it was necessary due to some of its activities...thus, unfortunately, my opinion of recent NATO activities is very unfortunate.*“²² It can't be stressed enough, that the personal opinions of political leaders are particularly important for their supporters, since they represent an extension of the party's values and further tendencies of their policy. Therefore, it is uncertain whether or not the number of those supporting Slovak membership in NATO, from amongst the largest block of voters, would significantly increase.

The Slovak National Party (SNS) is the only parliamentary party, which has stuck to its neutral policy. An SNS representative interviewed during the survey stated that, „*The SNS believes the only solution is neutrality, which in the European dimension means following the example of Switzerland, Austria, and Slovakia. We also believe, that should such a buffer zone of Central-European neutral states be established,...any potential conflicts could be effectively prevented...*“

In addition to the unambiguous, pro-integration position of SDKÚ and DS representatives, there have also been different positions presented by some coalition parties (KDH, SDL) questioning the purpose of integration. Some SDL representatives, for example, had questioned the political dimension of NATO and expressed some sort of unspecified doubts as to NATO's political powers, along with vague hints at the possibility of these powers being 'abused'. However, within the SDL such voices are overpowered by the strong and clear pro-Euro-Atlantic position of Minister of Defense Pavol Kanis. The question is which opinion will win within the party.

21 For more details see: Gyárfášová-Vešic, 2000.

22 A quotation from an interview recorded within the project „The view of NATO as perceived by Slovak politicians“. See: Gyárfášová-Vešic 2000.

The survey also showed a growing debate on a range of relevant issues concerning the advantages and disadvantages of Slovak membership in NATO. The initial reaction to proposed membership is, “yes, we want to become a member“, but this gradually develops into a more structured and in-depth discussion taking into account a wide range of more complex issues. The advantages of Slovakia’s future NATO membership are clearly seen as positive by the vast majority of politicians, including even those who take a more pragmatic approach towards Slovakia membership in NATO. There are two major advantages for Slovakia – a guaranteed security of the country and affiliation with a family of democratic and free states.

Conclusion

The process of preparing Slovakia for future NATO membership includes, among other concentrated efforts, working with the public. The main objectives are to fill the gaps in providing information to the public, to use logic and reason to disperse the wide-spread myths and misinformation, and to put Slovakia’s potential NATO membership back within the context of the country’s general integration efforts, by emphasizing the other positive, non-military and security aspects of membership. The support provided by the general public will certainly not be decisive in terms of whether or not Slovakia will gain admission to the Alliance. However, it would indicate a level of willingness and preparedness on the part of our society, something carefully taken into consideration by NATO.

The outcomes of surveys have indicated, that the negative impact of the Kosovo crisis on NATO’s image has slowly begun to fade. The majority of the population has regained its former pro-integration attitude. This trend is closely connected to improvements in providing information to the public, and also by the success of Slovakia in the integration processes (gaining OECD membership, negotiations with the EU). The crisis in Kosovo, however, still remains a prime example of political mismanagement, poor communication, and indecisiveness. In light of this, the major challenge for the current Cabinet, as well as for all those who favor Slovak membership in NATO, is to provide more information to the public about NATO. A clear explanation of NATO’s role and objectives 10 years after the cold war and its hopes for the ultimate dissolution of a bipolar world would go a long way in advancing these efforts.

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