

## **Slovakia: Consolidation of Democracy with State Sovereignty**

Since 1993, the Slovak Republic has gone through a development that is characteristic for any newly established independent state. In compliance with the Slovak Constitution adopted in September 1992, shortly before the split of the former Czechoslovak Federation, the country created an independent system of institutions of legislative, executive and judicial power. An authentic system of political parties gradually emerged. The structure, character and fundamental parameters of Slovakia's political system at the moment of acquiring its state sovereignty stemmed out of the general model of societal transformation that was implemented in Central European countries, mostly in Visegrad Four member states. The main practical objective of implementing this model was to create favorable conditions for incorporating the country into integration groupings of developed western democracies. In the political sphere, the most crucial tasks included establishing a system of pluralist democracy of parliamentary type with an efficient power division, continuous reproduction of conditions for maintaining sustainability of the democratic regime, a competitive system of electoral representation, efficient protection of human and minority rights, strengthening the fundamentals of the rule of law and creating favorable conditions for a civic participation.

### **A struggle for democracy in the period of 1993 – 1998**

By 2002, shortly before concluding the process of accession negotiations with the European Union (EU), the Slovak Republic virtually managed to develop a political system that is compatible with basic parameters of EU member states' institutional systems; however, developments which preceded that achievement in the period of 1993 – 1998 were not fully in compliance with general democratization and liberalization trends. Generally speaking, one could say that following the emergence of an independent Slovak Republic the country's development witnessed a reversal of previously pursued reform trends. In terms of a political system, the fundamental issue became the struggle for the future character of the country's political regime. This struggle was characteristic by the following features:

a fierce conflict between top constitutional officials;

confrontation between parties of the governing coalition and the opposition; throughout its 1994-1998 tenure, the ruling coalition of HZDS-ZRS-SNS repeatedly attempted to weaken opposition political parties through applying various mechanisms of state power and adopting discriminatory measures that virtually made it impossible to reach a consensus regarding the essential issues of domestic political development;

preparation, adoption and implementation of legislative initiatives designed to create an environment suitable for a comfortable concentration of the political power in the hands of dominant political forces;

gradual formation of the system of economic and political clientelism and creation of favorable social conditions for its reproduction;

calling basic constitutional principles in question;

strong polarization of the society;

aggravation of conflicts between state organs on the one hand and civil society institutions on the other, aggravation of tensions between the official state power and ethnic minorities;

abusing organs of state power for the benefit of party interests and goals.

Considering the character of changes the ruling coalition led by Vladimír Mečiar attempted to implement during the period of 1994 – 1998, it was not a standard political struggle between the government and the opposition that would be conducted in compliance with generally accepted principles but a struggle over the very nature of these principles. In other words, it was a struggle over the shape of rules regulating the future political competition in the country.

Another factor complicating the development of Slovakia's political system during the 90s was the reduced degree of citizens' self-identification with their own state. According to representative sociological surveys, a majority of the Slovak population in 1992 did not endorse division of the former Czechoslovakia and did not identify with the emergence of an independent Slovak Republic. The citizens' insufficient identification with their own state did not only ensue from the way of constituting Slovakia's statehood (i.e. splitting the former Czechoslovak Federation without applying the institution of referendum which would give citizens a chance to speak out on their preferred form of coexistence with the Czechs) but also from the anxiety of a significant part of the population that political forces gaining a dominant position in Slovakia following the 1992 parliamentary elections were incapable of steering the development toward strengthening the democratic fundamentals of the existing political regime but, on the contrary, would get off the right track.

### **A fundamental change of 1998**

Therefore, building the institutional fundamentals of a new state was accompanied for several years by the endeavor of democratic forces to preserve the degree of freedom and democracy achieved during the 1990 – 1992 period and, subsequently, to overcome the democratic deficit that prevented the country from fulfilling its integration ambitions after it was disqualified from the first wave of NATO enlargement and was not invited to open entry negotiations with the EU. This endeavor eventually led to a change in power following the 1998 parliamentary elections. The results of these elections reflected all changes that had occurred within the Slovak society since the collapse of the Communist regime in November 1989. The fact that tables turned in the 1998 elections was due to a high degree of political mobilization of all pro-democratic citizens, implementation of sufficiently effective coalition strategies by democratic political forces, formation of broad democratic alliances amalgamated by a single objective to prevent the authoritarian regime from cementing any further, activation of civil society players that efficiently combined spontaneous and organized activities, an

ability to capitalize on the expert potential accumulated within the non-governmental sector and general strengthening of the country's social capital.

The results of the 1998 parliamentary elections caused a dramatic change in the power ratio between chief political forces. The new government formed by five democratic parties (SDK-SDL-SMK-SOP-KDH) that ruled during the period of 1998 – 2002 was the government of a broad right-left coalition with representation of ethnic minorities. Its performance was extremely important from the viewpoint of country's overall democratic consolidation. Between 1998 and 2002, the parliament adopted legislative initiatives aimed at eliminating certain negative consequences of the previous administration's rule and stabilizing the country's political system and strengthening its democratic elements.

The previous Dzurinda administration created much more reliable institutional impediments against the authoritarian regime's possible relapse. It also amended the Slovak Constitution in order to prevent authoritarian forces to act in the way allowed for by its original version, that is, balancing on the edge of constitutionality and capitalize on a number of major loopholes that previously existed. The amended constitution deepened the country's democratic character and modernized the regulation of bonds between particular institutions. Slovakia's current system of checks and balances has become closer to systems that exist in developed democracies. Some brand institutions have been established (e.g. ombudsman for human rights or a Judicial Council), the Constitutional Court's position has been strengthened and the second level of self-governments has emerged (regional parliaments in higher territorial units).

The Slovak Republic opened accession negotiations with the EU two years later than most other candidate countries; however, in October 2002 Slovakia already ranked among the group of top candidates that had managed to close preliminarily the greatest number of chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. While before 1998 the European Union officially viewed Slovakia as a country that did not meet political criteria required for joining the Union, the European Commission in its evaluation report published in October 2002 observed that the Slovak Republic had achieved the required stability of institutions that guarantee democracy and the rule of law and that it fulfilled political criteria for joining the EU. The report also positively evaluated the implemented reform measures in the social and economic sphere and concluded that Slovakia is a functioning market economy.

The period of 1998 – 2002 was a period of general consolidation of Slovakia's democratic regime. At the same time, though, it was a period in which Slovakia was ruled by a broad coalition of parties with various ideological profile and different program priorities. Particular coalition partners' differing notions of tackling the most pressing social problems often reduced the cabinet's efficiency. The mutual co-operation of center-right parties on the one hand and leftist parties on the other was also complicated by pressures from various economic groups that tried to lobby the government through their personal bonds with particular party officials. Equally troubled were personal relations between individual coalition party leaders. During the period of 2000 – 2001, the ruling coalition had to overcome several internal crises that carried a potential risk of tearing the ruling coalition apart.

Despite all these problems, the first administration of Mikuláš Dzurinda survived the entire tenure relatively unharmed. The most important was the fact that during the final

year of its tenure the ruling coalition managed to preserve its stability to the extent that paved the way for a future continuation of the country's democratization, reform and pro-integration course. The system of constitutional institutions based on the division of power has worked flawlessly and relations between particular institutions has retained a co-operative character. Due to implementation of necessary legislative measures, the fundamentals of the rule of law have been cemented and general conditions for protection of human rights have been improved.

The period of 1998 – 2002 witnessed a series of significant changes in configuration of the system of political parties. There has been some substantial regrouping within the center-right segment of the political spectrum, giving birth to a new mid-sized party, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ). This party was established at the beginning of 2000 by two factions of the original SDK (part of Christian Democrats and Liberals) and has been headed from the beginning by Mikuláš Dzurinda. In 2001, the Alliance of a New Citizen (ANO) was established; the chairman of this liberally oriented party is Pavol Rusko, founder and co-owner of the largest private television station, TV Markíza.

Equally important changes occurred within the left segment of the political spectrum. A brand new party emerged under the name of Smer (Direction); its leader is Robert Fico, former vice-chairman of the post-communist SDL. Although Fico describes Smer as a “non-ideological” political subject, his party mustered support mostly among leftist voters. In the course of 2001 – 2002, several parties (coalition and opposition alike) experienced internal division processes, mostly along personal lines. After being virtually elbowed out of the SDL, its former leaders who fruitlessly tried to transform the old-fashioned Communist Party into a modern leftist party formed the Social Democratic Alternative (SDA); similarly, politicians who were kicked out of Mečiar's HZDS founded the Movement for Democracy (HZD); due to personal animosities, the Real Slovak National Party (PSNS) separated from the original Slovak National Party (SNS).

### **Parliamentary elections of 2002**

The most recent elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the country's parliament were held in September 2002. A total of seven parties – HZDS, SDKÚ, Smer, SMK, KDH, ANO and KSS – overcame the 5-percent threshold necessary to qualify to the legislative assembly (see the annex 1). Immediately after election results were released, four center-right parties – SDKÚ, SMK, KDH and ANO – concluded an agreement on their future co-operation. In mid-October 2002, these four parties' chairmen signed a coalition agreement and formed a new government led by SDKÚ Chairman Mikuláš Dzurinda. In the assembly, the new ruling coalition is supported by 78 out of 150 deputies.

The election results created favorable conditions for strengthening the country's general pro-reform and democratization course. The new ruling coalition comprises four center-right political subjects with similar programs, three of which (SDKÚ, SMK and KDH) have a history of mutual co-operation in the previous government. While the position of democratic political forces with a center-right orientation faces prospects of further consolidation following the elections, the position of nationalist, authoritarian and extreme nationalistic forces has considerably deteriorated due to strong internal

conflicts, subsequent fragmentation and the election fiasco. Neither of the two extreme nationalistic parties (PSNS, SNS) made it to the parliament. Significantly deteriorating are future prospects of moderate leftist forces (SDL, SDA) that have been relegated from the legislative assembly. On the other hand, the position of political forces that subscribe ideologically and politically to the hard line communist regime before 1989 improved considerably. For the first time in history of the independent Slovak Republic, representatives of these forces (KSS) were elected to the parliament.

In general, though, parliamentary election results confirmed a sufficient social support for the continuation of transformation processes. In 2002, the four pro-reform parties (SDKÚ, KDH, SMK and ANO) received more electoral votes than the two pro-reform parties (SDK and SMK) in 1998. However, the challenges facing the new ruling coalition today are much more difficult in some respects than those facing the previous Dzurinda administration four years ago. Back then, the general public expected fast and smooth changes to the better and, at least as far as the country's general course was concerned (especially in terms of consolidating the democratic regime), the government managed to fulfil these expectations.

Nevertheless, the previous Dzurinda administration's achievements in the socio-economic sphere were slightly less remarkable and much less frequent, mostly due to the already mentioned program differences between coalition parties. The disenchantment of many voters stemming from unfulfilled expectations of prompt and painless positive changes resulted in supporting the "alternative" Smer and the orthodox and old-fashioned KSS in the 2002 parliamentary elections. Today, the public does not expect merely some vague "improvements" but a thorough implementation of reforms in concrete areas, especially health service, social policy, pension system, education system and judiciary. Parties of the recently formed ruling coalition have managed again to raise strong expectations of thorough reforms among the population and citizens rightfully expect them to begin to act on what their representatives identified before elections as their main mission.

### **Future prospects**

The perspective of Slovakia's future development, including implementation of necessary reforms, will undoubtedly be affected by the general status of the country's political system. In this respect, a synergetic effect of the following factors can be envisaged:

- development of the institutional framework that would be compatible with that of EU member states (i.e. harmonization of Slovakia's legislation with that of the EU, building new institutions);
- promotion and gradual implementation of decentralization trends;
- continuation of rivalry between political parties with a different notion of power execution that advocate and champion different concepts of government (i.e. centralized state vs. decentralized state);
- the inevitability of forming majority ruling coalitions in order to secure stable conditions for governing;
- a sufficiently high degree of the population's political mobilization that is demonstrated by high election turnouts, especially in parliamentary elections

that are crucial for setting the general course of the Slovak society's development;

- volatile political preferences of a large number of voters who are dissatisfied with long-term solutions that do not produce immediate effects in terms of improving the general situation and bettering citizens' everyday lives, which creates favorable conditions for emergence of new, so-called "alternative" political formations.

Slovakia's positive domestic political development may be significantly helped by the process of incorporating the country's existing party system into the Union's political space, intensifying the bonds between political parties in Slovakia and their European partners through mutual co-operation in particular factions of the European Parliament. Slovakia's expected accession to the European Union should strengthen desirable development trends, particularly the following:

enhancing the level of citizens' actual participation in decision-making processes regarding issues that directly concern them;

preserving a continuous political stability and eliminating the occurrence of political upheavals that would dramatically change the country's political climate;  
respect for the rule of law, enhancing law enforceability and legal peace, waging a political campaign against corruption and combating criminality;  
marginalizing and possibly total weeding out all kinds of extremism from the country's political life so that it could not play a destabilizing role and threaten the fundamentals of democracy;

establishing and preserving correct relations between particular political players that would be as trouble-free as possible, maintaining a fair political competition in compliance with indisputable rules that have stood the test of time;

- eliminating the elements of provinciality from the country's political life which should create more favorable conditions for citizens' stronger self-identification with their own state;
- weeding out excessive politicization from various spheres of public life (e.g. economy, culture, education, art, etc.);
- establishing a professional modern political elite with a strong representation of younger people;
- achieving an adequate representation of women in country's politics;
- achieving an adequate representation of regional interests in government's policies.

Slovakia's widely expected accession to the European Union in 2004 would conclude the period of societal transformation. In Slovakia, the 15 years that will have passed since the collapse of the communist regime were a period of struggling for democracy, a period of many victories and defeats. But after all these years, the country is entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a functioning democracy that is firmly determined to link its future fate to that of a great family of European nations.

## Results of Parliamentary Elections 2002

Parties	Votes (in %)	Seats in the parliament
HZDS	19,50	36
SDKÚ	15,09	28
Smer	13,46	25
SMK	11,16	20
KDH	8,25	15
ANO	8,01	15
KSS	6,32	11
PSNS	3,65	-
SNS	3,32	-
HZD	3,28	-
SDA	1,79	-
SDĽ	1,36	-
Other 13 parties	4,80	-

### List of the Parties

ANO (Aliancia nového občana) – Alliance of a New Citizen

HZD (Hnutie za demokraciu) – Movement for Democracy

HZDS (Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko) - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia

KDH (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie) – Christian Democratic Movement

KSS (Komunistická strana Slovenska) – Communist Party of Slovakia

PSNS (Pravá Slovenská národná strana) – Real Slovak National Party

SDA (Sociálnodemokratická alternatíva) – Social Democratic Alternative

SDĽ (Strana demokratickej ľavice) – Party of the Democratic Left

SDK (Slovenská demokratická koalícia) - Slovak Democratic Coalition

SDKÚ (Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia) - Slovak Democratic and Christian Union

Smer - Direction

SMK (Strana maďarskej koalície) – Party of Hungarian Coalition

SNS (Slovenská národná strana) – Real Slovak National Party

ZRS (Združenie robotníkov Slovenska) – Workers' Association of Slovakia