

Slovakia: From a Difficult Case of Transition to a Consolidated Central European Democracy

Soňa Szomolányi

Introduction

In 2003 Slovakia is considered to be a new democracy that has accomplished the stage of early consolidation and, together with other Central European countries that are known also as the Visegrad group, will join the European Union in May 2004. According to the rating of democracy presented by Freedom House, Slovakia has the same rating as Hungary – 1.81 following after the most advanced countries of Poland and Slovenia. However this has not always been the case. In 1997 both the European Union and NATO rejected Slovakia's application for membership on political grounds alone. The Freedom House rating for that year was on the same level (3.80) as that of Russia, Macedonia, and Moldavia. Increasingly, commentators have come to view Slovakia as the deviant country in Central Europe. Therefore understanding how Slovakia managed to cope with attempts at nationalist authoritarianism represented by Vladimír Mečiar and his party (HZDS) in the period 1994-1998 may provide useful lessons to other countries that have attempted to renew democratic consolidation after periods of stagnation or reversal.

Generally, in the 1990s Slovakia had been a puzzle to students of East-Central European politics and was frequently described as 'a hard case' to categorize in one of the known ideal types of transitions (Kitschelt, 1995: 453), or referred to as a 'region specific country' (Heinrich, 1999), while other comparativists considered Slovakia as 'puzzling if compared with the situation of the Czech Republic' (Elster et al., 1998: 290). To identify Mečiar's rule from the perspective of the international dimension of regime

change, Geoffrey Pridham introduced the term ‘pariah regime’, arguing that, ‘while located in East-Central Europe – the region with the most likely entrants to the EU – Slovakia has presented a deviant example of transition’ (Pridham, 1999: 1228).

However, I would like to develop an argument that a more troubled transition path does not allow us to classify Slovakia as a deviant case in the sense of being the exception, or ‘outlier’ to an empirical generalization. On the contrary, the case of Slovakia confirms existing empirical generalizations from democratization studies (Dahl, 1989; Elster et al., 1998; Whitehead, 2000; Kitschelt, 1999; Evans and Whitefield, 1998) that define under which conditions a successful democratic consolidation is less likely.¹ The presence of unfavourable conditions in Slovakia – ethno-cultural heterogeneity, sub-cultural conflicts, in addition to the absence of a consensually unified elite, civil control of the security service, or any significant experience with independent statehood before 1993 – led to rather pessimistic forecasts.

I argue that it had not been easy to unambiguously categorize Slovakia’s case of regime change because in the 1990s it represented a borderline case between that of the more advanced Central European and the lagging South-East European countries. The studies of other authors also support the location of Slovakia’s case between the most advanced Central European countries and the so-called ‘laggards’ (Janos, 2000) or as a ‘mixed case’ (Kitchelt, 1999: 42). A classification of the countries of East Central Europe with respect to the degree of democratization according to the rating of Freedom House (1997) presented by Andrew Janos proposes the two categories – ‘procedurally correct’ (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia) and ‘troubled democracies’ (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, regions of rump Yugoslavia). Slovakia is defined here together with Croatia (for the years 1992-1996) as ‘two countries occupying an intermediary position as unstable, one-party dominant authoritarian systems with a record of simulating rather than practicing

1 Dahl in his descriptive theory of democracy argues that if a country lacks favourable conditions and obverse conditions are present, ‘a country will almost certainly be governed by a nondemocratic regime’ (Dahl, 1989: 264).

democratic government' (Janos, 2000: 386). Slovakia from the perspective of historical, cultural and economic belonging to the northwestern tier of the ECE due to its political developments in the years 1992-1996 can even be defined as an anomaly in the sense of disjuncture between political outcome – the presence of authoritarian tendencies – and its cultural and economic parameters.² The logic of such an anomaly is the logic of political instability (Janos, 2000: 398). This also suggests that 'politics matters' notwithstanding the structural parameters. While we can consider the definition of Slovakia's case as an anomaly in the above-proposed context, the presence of robust accumulation of structurally given less-favourable conditions for democratization makes Slovakia's theoretically expected trajectory more troubled and in this respect not a deviant case.

Slovakia has followed a more difficult transition path leading between that of the more advanced East Central European countries and the more troubled South-East European path of transition, at one point of time deviating from the former, getting closer to the latter and in another election period turning gradually back to the more promising trajectory. What is referred to as the 'East Central European' way of transition was generally described as the development that indicates the irreversible systemic change in the economy, political system, and political culture while heading toward political democracy, the rule of law, a functioning market economy, and an emerging civil society. In contrast, the South Eastern type of regime change may be generally characterized by disrespect for the principles of constitutionalism, a tendency to centralize executive power, and movement towards the establishment of a powerful, oligarchic, property-owning class (Duleba, 1997: 224). Furthermore, to operationalize the South Eastern type we could also add a tendency to understand and practice democracy as a populist-type of unchecked majority rule, and a delegative type of authority

2 'Within the paradigm presented here, the cases of Slovakia and Croatia represent anomalies, in that both of these societies are located in the region's Western cultural sphere, while their economies, structural weaknesses notwithstanding, are closer to those of the countries of the northwest than to those of the southeast' (Janos, 2000: 398).

rooted in a personalistic view of authority: ‘obedience is owed to persons rather than to formal and impersonal rules’ (Elster, 1998: 302).

In general, in comparison with its neighbouring Central European countries, there have been too many turning points in the post-1989 developments in Slovakia. The four free elections – those of 1990, 1992, 1994 and 1998 – may be characterized as so-called ‘critical elections’, representing turning points in political development and resulting in oscillation between the above-mentioned types of transition from communism (see also Ágh, 1998). The recent elections in 2002 were the first ones that were not crucial in the same sense as the preceding four that had all settled something more fundamental than a mere change in government or in policies. They confirmed the trend of democratic stabilization that was an outcome of the previous positive political changes and for the first time the results of the vote decided just a change in government and but not a change of political regime.

The first part of this paper deals with the question of why Slovakia had had a more difficult transition path. The second part examines how it happened. What has been crucial is that Slovakia has gradually achieved the stage of consolidation despite the existing theoretical expectations that were not promising for Slovakia. The question is what factors have become crucial for its return to democratic consolidation.

1. Slovakia’s Difficult Path to Democracy

1-1. Turning Points and Less Favourable Conditions for Democratization

The 1992 elections are referred to as those that ‘terminated’ the existence of the Czechoslovak state (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 322). These elections brought to power a government representing a highly heterogeneous alliance in terms of the ideological orientation of its social constituency. The followers of HZDS Chairman Mečiar were recruited from ex-communists and the spiritual heirs of the wartime state’s Slovak People’s Party on the platform of

‘national emancipation’.³ This alliance, known also as a ‘brown-red’ coalition, did not have a parallel in neighbouring Central European countries. However a variety of ‘red’ and ‘brown’ elements were present in umbrella parties in the South Eastern countries as in Milošević’s Serbian Socialist party and Tudjman’s Democratic Community of Croatia.

Although in the first Hungarian elections the attempt at bringing back anachronistic conservatism was successful, the party representing this stream in Slovakia – the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) – failed to come out on top in both the 1990 founding elections and in the subsequent 1992 elections. At the same time, while successors to the former communist party won the second elections in Poland in 1993 and in Hungary in 1994, they were not successful in Slovakia. In Slovakia the nationalist-populists prevailed, and after the 1992 elections they gained control over the transition at a time when the foundations were being laid for the country’s independent statehood.

The political outcome of the 1994 elections resulted in Slovakia’s deviation from the democratization path followed by the other three Central European countries and consequently in its being left behind in the first round of Euro-Atlantic integration. Finally, in the aftermath of the elections in 1998, there was relevant evidence for ‘turning back’ because the broad ruling coalition led by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda was heading unambiguously toward the Euro-Atlantic structures after refusing the ‘Eastern’ image of an autarkic and self-sufficient national third-road for Slovakia. Soon after the 1998 elections, the results suggested that

3 Considering the traditional personification of Slovakia’s political scene, the June 1992 elections did not represent a radical turning point in the political orientation of a majority of the Slovak population. The defeat of the liberal-democratic orientation two years after the VPN’s 1990 victory should not be interpreted as a radical change in the attitudes and value orientations of the voters. To a large extent, the voters supported the same politicians as they had in 1990, although this time these personalities appeared on the candidate lists of Mečiar’s newly-established HZDS. The HZDS succeeded in finding the right political expression for the Slovak population’s widespread inclination to paternalism and convinced voters that there was a less painful road of economic transformation than the radical one ruled from the federal centre in Prague.

if the country kept to the course that was set, forthcoming elections would be seen as consolidating in both their outcome and their implications (Szomolányi, 1999: 14) and now there is convincing evidence confirming the former assumption.

Between 1998 and 2002, Slovakia saw some truly remarkable changes that made the scenario for democratic continuity more realistic than sliding back to post-communist authoritarianism. There was substantial progress in democratic consolidation, the political system was stabilized, the country's international position improved considerably and essential reforms were launched in important sectors of society (e.g. the constitutional system, armed forces, the banking and tax systems, public administration, etc.).

The results of the most recent elections in 2002 have indeed significantly contributed to the consolidation of democracy as they created favourable conditions for continuing the positive changes that had been introduced after the 1998 elections. Why?

The key to the explanation as to why Slovakia's transition trajectory has been more difficult and oscillating than that of other Central European countries lies in the robust accumulation of both less favourable conditions for democratic consolidation and, simultaneously, the higher number of tasks that Slovakia has had to complete and that were given structurally. Slovakia has a higher degree of ethnic heterogeneity,⁴ and lacks a sustained historical experience with statehood. The additional challenge of state-building that was a consequence of the mode of the resolution of the 'statehoodness problem' of the former Czechoslovakia has even further complicated democratization in Slovakia.⁵ By and

4 According to the results of the 1991 population census, approximately 14% of the citizens of the Slovak Republic claim other than Slovak nationality. Slovakia thus has one of the highest proportions of ethnic minorities of any country in Europe, trailing only Macedonia, Spain, and Croatia. In total, 567,300 Slovak citizens claimed Hungarian nationality in 1991, putting their share of the overall population at 10.76%. Although only 76,000 citizens declared Romany nationality in the same census, many experts estimate that their true number is actually several times higher (250,000 - 400,000 people) (Dostál, 2001).

5 The similar view presents the comparative study conducted by 'outsiders': '... Slovakia is the country which is exposed in the purest and most pressing manner to the difficult task which we described ... namely to cre-

large, Slovakia provides evidence for the following generalization deduced from current democratization studies: 'Where state formation has already been completed (i.e. territorial boundaries are secure, and national identities are well formed) democratic consolidation will be much easier than where state formation and democratization have to be attempted simultaneously' (Whitehead, 2000: 363). Moreover, the mode of resolution of the statehood problem and the circumstances and events under which the independent state was established had a significant formative effect on the political behaviour and configuration of Slovakia's national elite. The origin of the independent state strengthened the disunity of the political elites.

The final resolution of the statehood problem of the former Czechoslovakia was accomplished in the aftermath of the 1992 elections by a pact between the incoming Prime Ministers Vladimír Mečiar and Václav Klaus, which led to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic on January 1, 1993. The building of a national state complicated the process of democratization significantly. These two parallel processes of 'nation-state building' and 'democratization' have been rather contradictory and have made the regime change in Slovakia more difficult. Historically, the issues of Slovak national identity and independent statehood have been the most divisive issues, generating opposite camps both at the elite and mass levels of Slovak society. These issues have not been less divisive in the new Slovak Republic. On the contrary, by 1993 the bitter fights over national identity, national issues and ethnic questions, economic transformation, and Mečiar's intolerant and undemocratic leadership style, had greatly divided both the political elites and the mass public in Slovakia. From the perspective of dependency theory, Slovakia's development initially followed one of the paths of democratic transitions that is determined by the absence of elite settlement and leads to a state of polarization between elites and the masses, which in turn can lead either to un-

ating simultaneously a new nation, a new economic structure, and new legal and political institutions' (Elster et al., 1998: 292).

consolidated democracy, pseudo-democracy, or a reversion to authoritarianism.⁶ This means that the consolidated democracy is very unlikely for a country without an elite settlement. This was then the case in Slovakia.

However, we argue that the centrality of ethnic and national questions to politics in Slovakia is not conditioned by a distinct political culture of ethnic intolerance or nationalism,⁷ but rather it is the result of the challenges of state-building given structurally and represented by the existence of a salient Hungarian minority with ties to an interested neighbour as well as a significant Roma population. Generally it is predicted that under the condition of high ethnic heterogeneity, ethnic rights issues are more salient bases of partisanship (see Evans and Whitefield, 1998). The case of Slovakia presented in another discussion of less favourable conditions for building and consolidating democracies runs along similar lines: 'Where ethnic divisions play a role and where difficulties of political agency are still burdened with the additional problem of nation state-building, then political polarization and uncivilized forms of political competition and struggle prevail. This is the case in Slovakia' (Elster, 1998: 148).

The validity of the generalisation is proved by the empirical finding that a basic politico-cultural cleavage follows ethnic lines between Slovaks and Hungarians (see Krivý, 1997). Although this divide does not represent a fatal obstacle, it nevertheless enables non-democratic politicians who strive for political and economic power to mobilise the potential of ethnic differences and historical resentments to serve their purposes. Moreover, ethnicity is an emotive issue which may well bring forth the demagogue in politicians such as Mečiar. Considering the generalisations that ethnic divisions tend to be less negotiable, identities more fixed, and

6 Crucial to this argument is that once a country reaches one of the nodes in the path - elite settlement and mobilization, or no elite settlement and mass mobilization - certain outcomes are no longer available, suggesting that without an elite settlement and mass democratization, democratic consolidation is not likely (Landman, 2003: 69).

7 An explanation of Slovakia's divergent political outcomes by a distinct political culture as more nationalist and populist illustrates the study of Carpenter (1997).

ethnic political conflicts less easily accountable in terms of instrumental orientations, it is expected that levels of political conflict and elite instability under such conditions are higher than in a country where socio-economic cleavages – as is the case in the Czech Republic – predominate.⁸ The political outcomes of Slovakia in the 1990s provide another illustration of that general proposition.

The changes brought about by the 1992 elections in Slovakia that ultimately led to the division of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic impeded the implementation of systemic changes in the post-1989 period, contributing instead to the slowing down of privatization, to the authoritarian tendencies of the new ruling elite, and to fragmentation of the political scene. Those changes represented a detour from the Czechoslovak transition path. After the critical turning point that came about as a result of the HZDS election victory, the country had to re-embark on the road, which it had already travelled, but this time in the framework of a separate Slovak political system. The building of the institutional foundations of the new state was also connected with the problem of safeguarding the level of liberalization and democratization that had already been attained by the previous federal state. The writing and adoption of the Slovak Constitution, the creation of the Constitutional Court, determination of the degree of independence of the National Bank of Slovakia from the executive branch, as well as the legislative enactment of the public service status of the Slovak Radio and Slovak Television were marked by disputes concerning the character of the new statehood. The process of decision-making about the direction of the transition from the ‘old’ to the ‘new’ regime was thus launched all over again.

8 A comparative empirical study of Slovakia and the Czech Republic asking how voter’s political opinions shape the way they think about political parties concludes with the argument that, in contrast to the Czech voters who focus on economic issues, in Slovakia voters’ feelings about parties revert to the more fundamental questions of nation building. Data are from surveys conducted during 1992-96 (Krause, 2000).

1-2. The Elite Continuity and New Democratic Institutions

According to some analysts, Slovakia's transition path was getting closer to a model defined as a transition from an early post-totalitarian regime to 'a successor regime that is likely to be authoritarian or controlled by leaders who have emerged from the previous regime' (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 60). Like the situation in Prague, the transition in Bratislava started off with a collapse. However, in Slovakia the old regime politicians preserved considerable control over developments in the period prior to the 1990 founding elections through Prime Minister Milan Čič and other ministerial positions in the 'Government of National Understanding', as well as through parliament chairman Rudolf Schuster. The former was the first chairman of the Constitutional Court in post-independence Slovakia, a most trusted institution, and the latter as a candidate of the ruling coalition became the first directly elected President. Considering the most crucial political cleavage between democrats and nationalist-populists, it should be pointed out that neither of these two belongs to the nationalist-populist camp.

At the level of the political elite, the assumption of power by the victorious HZDS represented an important strengthening of personnel continuity with the old regime. After the 1992 elections the top four constitutional posts were occupied by former Communist Party members, with two of them controlled by the former nomenklatura. The President, Michal Kováč and Chairman of the Constitutional Court, Milan Čič were selected for the posts as loyal collaborators of Vladimír Mečiar in the process of the dissolution of the former Czechoslovakia. The constitutionally delimited powers allowed both of them to behave independently and succeed to oppose the authoritarian tendencies of the second Mečiar-led ruling coalition (1994-1998). This demonstrates that the nomenklatura past cannot be defined as the determinant of political behaviour of the post-communist elite. The fact that 99 of 150 parliamentary deputies were former members of the Communist Party reflected also a high level of continuity when compared with Slovakia's neighbours (see Szomolányi, 1994a).⁹ The former

9 This includes Slovakia's '68ers', although it must be noted that only a few

Communist party membership itself, however, cannot be understood as an independent variable in an explanation of the new political elite behaviour. In Slovakia the crucial political cleavage does not run along the communist/non-communist past of the elite members. Law 125/1996 which condemned the immorality and illegality of the communist system passed due to both the anti-Communist Christian Democratic deputies and deputies of the HZDS among which the past Communist party membership is highly represented. This instrumental alliance has diminished the moral aspect of the law and eventually it does not have any other impact.

A comparative study of the composition of the new elites (the empirical research was conducted in 1993) indicates that party members are over-represented in all elite segments when compared to the 12 per cent membership in the general population. Namely there were 40.1 per cent of the new political elite Communist party members and 16 per cent of them held CP office during 1988, while in the Czech Republic the proportion of those with a party card was only 22.64 per cent and only 1.2 per cent of them hold CP office (Rona-Tas, Bunčák and Harmadyová, 1999: 6). A part of the explanation of such a significant difference lies in how the so-called Lustration law was implemented in both republics of the former Czechoslovakia. While Klaus's anti-Communist coalition used the Lustration law to ban the participation of the Communist cadres in politically important public posts, Mečiar instrumentally used the files of the Secret state police for his own power game and suspended the law after Slovakia's independence.

The identified personal continuity of the political elite indicates both the absence of the revolutionary exchange of the elites

of them (for example, Milan Šimečka and Miroslav Kusý) openly opposed the Communist regime before 1989. By and large, that generation of former Communists – especially the economists – opposed the federal economic reforms and had not given up the idea of reform socialism. Before the 1992 elections they generally backed nationalist-populist parties and supported the illusion of the feasibility of a specifically national, painless solution to the complex tasks of transformation. In the case of Slovakia, the 'reform Communists' were no less influenced by Marxist ideology than was the younger generation with a more pragmatic orientation.

after the collapse of the old communist regime in Slovakia as well as the absence of counter-elites prepared to take power over. In comparison with the more liberalized political systems in Hungary and Poland, we find in Slovakia a delay of many years since a similar opening to the world, and contacts between the counter-elite and the communist power as it occurred there in the late 1970s and 1980s, began in Slovakia only after November 1989. In comparison with the Czech Republic, it is again necessary to emphasize especially the different course of the normalization period after 1969, and its effect on developments after 1989. In Slovakia, repression of the normalization was more moderate than in the Czech Republic, and the party purge did not affect the Slovak intellectual and cultural community to such a large extent. This was so because the reform process here did not have such numerous support and the demand for federalization dominated over the demand for democratization.

The self-preserving inclination to the traditional 'familism' led to avoidance of direct confrontation with the state authorities. This national defensive philosophy of survival, with the smaller number of reform communists affected by political purges, which were not so severe as in the Czech Republic, explains the difference in the numbers of the opposition. While in the Czech Republic, there were over 1,000 signatories of Charter 77, among whom were hundreds of activists, in Slovakia there were not even ten well-known cultural figures. In the 1970s and 1980s, opposition to the communist regime in the countries of Central Europe was weakest and least visible in Slovakia. In addition, this opposition was very fragmented. In comparison with the numerous Czech dissident movements, from which members of the new elite were recruited after November 1989, in Slovakia there were only small groups of nonconformist individuals, for whom the term 'islands of positive deviation' has been adopted (Bútora, Krivý and Szomolányi, 1989). The politicized protest and criticism of the intellectuals was rather isolated from the popular consciousness and unknown to the overwhelming majority of the population of Slovakia. Revolutionary changes came to Slovakia before these islands, which were relatively isolated from each other as well as from the Czech, Polish and Hungarian dissidents, could unite and create a common platform of opposition to the communist

regime. Representatives of these isolated nonconformist communities of artists, scientists, environmentalists and Catholic activists achieved political cooperation only at the time of the November Revolution of 1989 when the Public Against Violence (VPN) movement was established.

A certain level of elite continuity is generally considered to be a condition for democratic consolidation since it gives elites a sufficient feeling of security so that they do not have to perceive democratic competition in elections as a threat to their position. For this reason, the old nomenclature elite continuity in Poland and Hungary, which research puts at 50 per cent, was not an obstacle to the democratic transition (Wasilewski, 1998: 166). There is, however, a certain threshold, as in the case of Southeastern Europe and Russia (in the latter, 71 per cent of the new elite are members of the old nomenklatura), beyond which the relationship between the rate of elite continuity and democratic progress becomes inverse (Highley et al., 1996). After the 1992 elections in Slovakia, the elite continuity at the top political level approached the aforementioned threshold, beyond which there is a high probability of reversibility of the political transformation.

More important, however, than the percentage of former Communist party members in the new elites is how many of them asserted themselves in the nationalist-populist parties and in what constitutional design they execute their power. The high level of elite continuity is also the reason why the transition paths of Slovakia and Bulgaria are often referred to as being of the same type (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Kitschelt, 1995; Olson, 1993). Such categorizing, however, is not quite justified since the 1990-1992 institutionalization phase of the regime change took place within the framework of the common Czechoslovak transition path and was controlled by the liberally orientated VPN and the non-communist KDĽ, particularly under the Černogurský government. Parliamentary democracy and an electoral system based on proportional representation, which are considered to be part of an appropriate institutional framework for democratic transition, were introduced at that time and have been preserved also in in-

dependent Slovakia after the electoral victory of the nationalist-populist HZDS.

The inertia of the new democratic institutions largely contributed to the fact that even authoritarian politicians were not able to pull Slovakia to the path of authoritarianism. The fact that in September 1995 Mečiar proposed a constitutional amendment regarding the president's status indicates that only later he became aware of restraints of the preserved institutional framework. According to Mečiar's plan, the president was to be elected directly by the people and his powers were to merge with those of prime minister. It was a failed attempt due to the lack of support of the minor parties to achieve a three fifths majority in the parliament.

It may be argued that certain institutions have emerged neither 'out of rational compromises' nor as a 'result of elite strategy to preserve or obtain power' (Heinrich, 1999: 2) but by default or underestimation of the importance of the institutional framework by the incoming nationalist-populist elite that prioritized the symbolic function of the Constitution over its substantial aspects. While this elite faction emphasized the symbolic function of the Constitution as a symbol of independence of Slovakia and endeavoured to adopt it faster than in the Czech Republic, the substance of the constitutional provisions was not considered so important at the time of its drafting.

1-3. Struggle Over the Rules of the Game or 'Institutions Do Matter'

The situation in Slovakia became exceedingly complicated after the 1994 elections, which brought to power the third government led by Mečiar. This time, Mečiar's HZDS was joined by the nationalist SNS and a new extreme left party, the Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS), and it was the first of Mečiar's three governments that managed to remain in office for the full term. The 1994 elections resulted in political regression and in Slovakia's departure from the promising Central European variant of transition that was followed by the three other countries which – together with Slovakia – make up the Visegrad group: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. This deviation was identified in the struc-

tural characteristics of the system of political parties, elite configuration, and political culture (Szomolányi, 1994b).

The aftermath of the 1994 elections brought not only a change in the government elite but also attempts by the incoming ruling coalition to alter the 'rules of game' that were put in place by the post-Communist democratic regime. Apart from the changes that the incoming coalition pushed through the parliament during the historic all-night session of the National Council on 3-4 November 1994, other less successful attempts at changing the foundations of the constitutional framework were also registered. The HZDS wanted to replace the parliamentary system with a presidential one; however, the government's simple majority was insufficient, and it needed another seven to eight deputies to approve constitutional changes. Although only a simple parliamentary majority was needed to change the electoral law, the HZDS was prevented from carrying out its plans to switch from a proportional to a majority system because its junior coalition partners – as well as the opposition – saw such a step as unfavourable.

The impact of the HZDS style of politics resulted in Slovakia being left behind in the first round of the Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Exclusion from the group of increasingly Westward-looking Central European countries – a place where Slovakia belongs both historically and culturally – raised the risk that Slovakia would remain peripheral and isolated from the mainstream integration process. This can only be seen as a failure of Slovakia's national elite.¹⁰ While elite failure also contributed to the split of Czechoslovakia (which was the result of a pact between the winners of the 1992 elections), socio-cultural differences between the two nations also played an important role in this development. By contrast, the failure of Slovakia under Mečiar's rule to participate in the first wave of EU and NATO integration was clearly the result

10 The term 'national elite' is used here in its generally accepted meaning, according to which national elites are 'defined as top position-holders in the largest or most resource-rich political, governmental, economic, military, professional, communications, and cultural organizations and movements in a society' (Higley -Burton, 1989: 18).

of the supremacy of the personal interests of those in power to preserve it over the national interests.

The situation in Slovakia during the rule of the HZDS-ZRS-SNS coalition, combined with the absence of formally defined representation of opposition in running the parliament, clearly displayed 'a tendency toward unchecked majority rule' (Malová, 1998: 55). This kind of government, where one branch of power has no possibility of controlling other branches, can hardly be compared with a majority-based democracy of the Westminster type. The latter is based on the tradition of self-imposed constraints on the power of the ruling party and on strong constitutionalism. Although O'Donnell's notion of the 'delegative type of democracy' is applied to Slovakia to describe its defective democracy (O'Donnell, 1996), the notion of 'illiberal democracy' better identifies the political style of Mečiar's third government (see Zakaria, 1998). Immediately after the 1994 elections it was clear that the democratic transition had not yet been accomplished because the holders of political power strove not only to defend their immediate interests but also to introduce rules and procedures that would guarantee that the winners of the last elections would remain in power in the future (Szomolányi, 1994b: 29). At that point, the consolidation stage was already underway, during which all actors began to accept the constitutional framework of the new state as the basic reference point for political conduct. Nonetheless, institutionalisation, or the struggle over how that framework is respected and implemented, was still progressing (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986: 6). This continued to be true shortly before the 1998 elections.

The proportional electoral system prevented Mečiar's Movement for Democratic Slovakia from governing Slovakia on its own and forced it to form a coalition. Without the will of his minor allies, even such an autocratic politician as Mečiar could not have gained the simple parliamentary majority necessary for reforming the electoral system to a majoritarian or mixed system as he intended in 1996. Due to the proportional electoral system even Mečiar could not have gained a three-fifths majority in parliament to change the constitution.

After the third Mečiar's coalition failed to obtain the three-fifths parliamentary majority, in order to call off the President a strategy of reducing his powers by amendments of laws was implemented. In this way the President was stripped of his power to appoint a director of the Slovak Information Service. The latter was appointed and recalled on the Prime Minister's proposal by the Government. The same transfer of power was achieved by the amendment related to the appointment of the Chief of General Staff of Military Forces. In September 1995, the Government accused the President of undermining the constitutional system and urged him to step down. Then the state administration staff at various levels was involved in the campaign calling on the President to resign. However, all attempts of Mečiar to remove President Kováč revealed that constitutional provisions made it impossible for a government to remove a president it detests.

The constitutional provisions regarding the presidency were subjected to frequent criticism for their controversial nature.¹¹ However, the long lasting conflict of Prime Minister Mečiar with President Kováč subjected that arrangement to a difficult test. The fact is, that despite the long conflict between the president and prime minister, Michal Kováč completed his five year term in office and opposed the authoritarian attempts of the ruling coalition.

Deficiencies in the Slovak constitution are one reason to explain the so-called 'democratic deficit' attributed in the EU Commission's evaluation of Slovakia, accentuating that the 'hastily and poorly drafted constitution allowed for the emergence of an uncivilised majority rule, when political forces representing hardly one third of the population dominated the country's politics' (Malová 1998). However, it is justified to argue that the 'constitution allowed' and not 'determined' unchecked majority rule. Therefore we can define the political elite configuration as an in-

11 In our 'Scenario 2005' (printed in August 1993, p. 53) we correctly pointed out the controversial provisions that made the Constitution itself the source of conflict particularly in such a country where there is an unsettled elite, lacking underlying procedural and cultural consensus which precisely was the case of Slovakia.

dependent variable in the explanation of the so-called ‘democratic deficit’. The configuration of relevant actors that resulted from the 1992 elections was a national elite disunited over the issues of economic transformation and particularly privatisation, the statehood problem, and eventually disagreement on the way to craft a new constitution. The victorious majority excluded the experts of the defeated political subjects from participating in the crafting of the constitution. Then the constitution turned into a divisive issue not only because of what was contained within some provisions, but also due to how it was drafted and ratified.¹²

The maintenance of the constitutional design built during the former Czechoslovak state functioned as a constraint that limited the authoritarian inclination of the incoming ruling elite already in the aftermath of the 1992 elections. To conclude the discussion, it may be argued that the constitution of the SR had had an ambivalent quality, or in other words, it was a ‘perfect imperfect constitution’. On the one hand, its deficiencies allowed Mečiar and his allies to execute power in the ‘winner takes all’ style – because the spirit of democratic constitutionalism among the nationalist-populist governing elites was lacking – and on the other hand, it had prevented Mečiar from imposing his autocratic intentions fully, and even under his rule Slovakia remained a democracy though an ‘illiberal’ one.¹³ Some unclearly drafted constitutional rules and their violation without sanction result – as Malová emphasizes – in the situation when ‘the political process has become dominated by a set of informal rules. Indeed, the predominance of informal rules has emerged as a competing structuring principle shaping the be-

12 The deputies and the parties – Christian Democratic Movement and Hungarian Coalition – that voted against the Constitution were later stigmatised and accused of working against the interests of the nation.

13 A comparison of the Serbian Constitution with that of Slovakia explains why Mečiar, despite the fact that he is frequently compared with Milošević as the same type of authoritarian politician, has not installed an authoritarian regime in Slovakia. While the Constitution of Serbia already before its adoption in 1990 was described as a scenario for dictatorship and a system of personal power (Stepanov, 1999: 13), the Constitution of the SR despite its imperfections provides a democratic type of institutional framework.

haviour of the political elite' (Malová, 2001:378). Because the consensus of the relevant elites to exercise restraint was missing, the imperfections were abused by power holders. Therefore I share a view that 'the imperfections of the Slovak constitution may have contributed to the failure of consolidation, but it is equally plausible to assume that also a more perfect constitutional architecture might not have produced different outcomes of the transition process' (Elster et al., 1998: 291) under the condition of the unsettled political elite.

Despite the stability of the formal democratic institutions, the implementation of democratic procedures was often thwarted by the policies of those in power, and the continuing struggle over the rules of the game also reduced certainty and enhanced ambiguity. However, despite the ruling coalition's use of many authoritarian and undemocratic practices, the process of regime change led neither to democratic consolidation nor to the establishment of an authoritarian regime. After the thwarted referendum on NATO and direct presidential elections in May 1997, from a constitutional perspective Slovakia deviated even further from the path to democratic consolidation and became known as an example of illiberal democracy in Central Europe. In short, before the 1998 elections, Slovakia was an unconsolidated, unstable democracy. It means that despite the deviation from the more advanced three Central European neighbours, Slovakia developed consistently with the above-mentioned path dependency argument – 'where polarization between elites and masses is present we expect at best unconsolidated democracy'. It remained, however, a democracy because fundamental – though fragile – democratic institutions persisted and functioned as restraints.¹⁴

That Slovakia had the basic trappings of democracy but was unable to satisfy the political prerequisites for EU admission highlights even more the importance of political elites in the tran-

14 The comparative study of constitution-building in East Central Europe also 'suggests that even imperfect constitutions, in terms of substance and adoption procedures, managed to curb the ongoing institutional power struggle and created legal and political conditions in which democracy had a chance to assert itself' (Zielonka, 2001: 47).

sition from state socialism (Gould and Szomolányi, 1998). It is possible that democratic competition or institutions may threaten the basic interests of one or more elite groups. When this happens, attempts to protect those interests by non-democratic means become a real possibility. This, in a nutshell, explains the fragility of Slovak democracy during the 1990s. While democratic institutions have been in place, elite behaviour and elite relations have marred their effectiveness and undermined their integrity. Much of the reason relates to divisions among Slovak elites over the controversial issues of national identity and sovereignty that have dominated Slovak political life for most of the twentieth century. Slovak independence on January 1, 1993, did not resolve these issues or eradicate long-standing elite divisions. Having succeeded in establishing an independent Slovak state, nationalist elites sought to use the offices of the Slovak government to retain political power and control over the privatization process while claiming to defend national sovereignty against internal and external enemies as they defined them. During his two terms as Prime Minister of the independent state (1992 - March 1994, November 1994 - 1998), Vladimír Mečiar and his ruling party HZDS presented the vision of a nation at risk in order to justify denying opponents access to decision-making channels and institutional centres of authority that could be used to challenge their control. The government's actions raised the stakes of political competition.¹⁵ By making institutions the end product, rather than the arbiter, of political conflict, HZDS rule biased the rules of political competition against opposing groups. Under such conditions, even disputes over small issues were contested like fights for political survival.

15 Slovakia is just another empirical case to confirm theoretically expected threats to democratic legitimacy and effectiveness 'in formerly patrimonial communist countries if politicians find it advantageous to construct competitive dimensions that combine multiple reinforcing political-economic and socio-cultural divides. This is particularly likely where politicians invoke questions of collective national autonomy or ethno-cultural relations within the arena of party competition. Ethno-cultural politics increases the chances that policy making evolves into zero-sum games among rent-seeking groups' (Kitschelt, 1999: 405).

2. Returning to Stable Democratic Development

2-1. The 1998 Elections: More Than Just a Change of Ruling Elite

In the election campaign of 1998 a broad left-right coalition of five opposition parties (KDH, DU, DS, SDSS, and SZS) formed a single movement, the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK). Other opposition parties – notably the ex-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) – pledged not to enter into a coalition with HZDS following the election. Therefore, although HZDS won a tiny plurality of 0.7 per cent over the SDK coalition, it emerged virtually isolated on the political spectrum. The HZDS leaders admitted that this was at best a pyrrhic victory and stepped down from power. After lengthy negotiations among the victorious opposition parties, a broad SDK-led coalition government with a constitutional parliamentary majority took office. The replacement of the nationalist-populist governing elite responsible for the political regression in the previous period by the broad coalition of democratically oriented parties led by Dzurinda due to the results of the free 1998 elections increased the likelihood of the consolidation of democracy in Slovakia.¹⁶

What exactly was the sequence of events that ultimately led to the peaceful replacement of the ruling elite in Slovakia in the aftermath the 1998 elections? The following moments and actors' choices should be highlighted.

Fear of a constitutional crisis and the concentration of power in the hands of the authoritarian Prime Minister Mečiar due to the failure to elect a new head of state in the parliament mobilized the centre right parties and the Hungarian coalition to impose the referendum on direct presidential elections as their own political agenda. The obstruction of the referendum in May 1997 evidently played a pivotal role in triggering positive change (see Mesežnikov and Bútorá, 1997). The course of events that was triggered by the

16 The concept of 'consolidation' is here understood as 'the process by which the essential characteristics of the various democratic structures and norms are established and the secondary ones adapted as to ensure their persistence over time' (Morlino, 1986: 574).

opposition's petition calling for a referendum on direct presidential elections brought an outcome that was not intended by any of the relevant actors. Nobody would have expected that rather than leading directly to the election of a president, the petition campaign would instead result in a thwarted referendum whose consequences were counterproductive for Mečiar and, conversely, favourable for the democratic players. Five democratic parties (KDH, DU, DS, SDSS, SZS) established the Slovak Democratic Coalition representing a real threat to the dominant position of the HZDS in the 1998 elections. The opposition leaders eventually learned how to aggregate articulated interests for political change in the country. The conclusion can be made that the opposition's decision to impose its own agenda was the 'right' decision of the actors at the 'right' time.

The results of Slovakia's 1998 parliamentary elections also demonstrated progress achieved in regard to the population's attitudes. The population's gradually increased support for democratic principles was observed as early as 1997, and this shift in citizens' preferences was confirmed by the voting behaviour of a majority of the citizens in the 1998 elections (see Bútorová, 1998; Bútorá, 1998). The population's increased level of political maturity was undoubtedly influenced by the experience of personal confrontation with the arrogant ruling elite, which refused to launch a dialogue with the civic and interest associations. The recent Slovak development verifies the thesis about a positive function of articulation of conflict in democratic consolidation (see Rustow, 1970).

The population's trial-and-error method of political learning also resulted in gradually pushing charismatic leader Vladimír Mečiar, the three-time prime minister, from the centre of power. When Mečiar was first ousted from the post of prime minister in March 1991, the decision was made by a narrow political elite group – the Presidium of the Slovak Parliament – against the will of the people (public opinions polls at that time showed that Mečiar was supported by close to 85 per cent of the population). When Mečiar was toppled for the second time in March 1994, that decision was made by a plenary session of the parliament without pro-

voking significant protests from the population. In the third case, Mečiar was removed from office by a majority of voters in the 1998 elections.

2-2. Transition from Mečiarism – a Precondition of the Democratic Consolidation

One criterion for measuring the achieved level of institutionalization of democratic political behaviour, i.e. a behavioural dimension of democratic consolidation, is, according to Samuel Huntington, the so-called two turnover test. ‘A second turnover shows two things. First, two major groups of leaders in the society are sufficiently committed to democracy to surrender office and power after losing an election. Second, both elites and publics are operating within the democratic system; when things go wrong, you change the rulers, not the regime’ (Huntington, 1991: 267).

If the creation of the independent Slovakia is taken as a starting point, two government alternations of democratically elected governments have already taken place. In this case, Slovakia has passed the ‘two turnover test’. After Slovakia gained independence, the first such alternation occurred after the autumn 1994 elections, when Moravčík’s caretaker government handed power to Mečiar. The power was transferred in a peaceful manner without any delays as soon as the HZDS had formed a new cabinet with the SNS and ZRS.

After the 1998 elections, the Mečiar government delayed calling the constituent session of the new parliament until the last possible day – 29 October 1998 – and during that session it handed in its resignation as required by the constitution. The new cabinet of Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda was appointed one day later. Despite fears that the HZDS would employ unconstitutional means to cling to power after its electoral defeat in 1998, the second peaceful turnover demonstrated that there were at least two major groups of leaders in Slovakia ‘sufficiently committed to democracy to surrender office and power after losing an election’ (Huntington, 1991: 267).

If nothing else, this second peaceful turnover clearly demonstrates that Slovakia has fulfilled the minimal criteria of an elec-

torally-defined democracy, which both domestic and international observers feared was under threat prior to the September 1998 elections. Thus, real space was created for strengthening the procedural consensus between the post-election government coalition and the new opposition, which is a necessary prerequisite for calling the 1998 elections truly consolidating, even after the passage of time.

However, it is more appropriate to assume that the process of consolidation started only with the 1998 elections since the previous period was one of political regression. In general, this regression has been labelled as ‘Mečiarism’ and may be characterised by pervasive clientelism (particularly in the privatisation process), delegative rule, and weak horizontal accountability, which have allowed a number of authoritarian practices to reassert themselves under the cover of formally existing democratic institutions.¹⁷

Therefore the consolidation of democracy presumes an institutional revision including a revision of the Constitution. The institutional revision implies the need to repeat the processes which are typical of the institutionalisation stage. Successive Mečiar governments eroded the centres of institutional authority and power: the President, parliamentary opposition, constitutional court, and mass media. Because they took undemocratic actions in a formally democratic environment, many of their decisions, especially those concerning privatisation and internal security, were kept secret. By blocking the access of the opposition to the decision-making channels they succeeded in carrying out such measures which ultimately weakened the democratic institutions. In that case, the country started its transition from ‘Mečiarism’, only after

17 In his attempt to describe the anatomy of Mečiarism Fish writes: ‘Mečiar built more than a government. He created a regime of a particular type. In organizational and institutional terms, Mečiarism was characterized by personalization and de-ideologization of the party and partyization of the state... Mečiar’s utter contempt for regular procedures, norms, and rules was not limited to the realm of coercion and control. It was the defining characteristic of his style of rule. Mečiar revelled in arbitrariness and in breaking even those rules that he had made, or acquiesced in, himself’ (Fish 1999: 47-49).

the 1998 elections and at least one other set of elections was needed to test the stability of Slovakia's democratic institutions and values.

2-3. The Institutional Revision and Performance of the First Dzurinda Government

The political outcome in Slovakia since the ruling elite exchange after the 1998 elections was a period of stabilisation. The introduction of direct presidential elections to the Constitution in 1999 is evaluated also as evidence that the democratic transition has been completed.

After the broad coalition succeeded in remedying a systemic flaw of the institutional arrangement by amending the original Constitution, Slovakia (on February 23, 2001) has institutionalised a framework that approximates other East Central European countries and is conducive to the consolidation of democracy. This framework is comprised of parliamentary democracy, a proportional representation electoral system, a multiparty system, coalition government, and constitutional review. In general, such an arrangement lessens the stakes in politics, minimising zero-sum outcomes as it limits the strong institutionalisation of majority rule and tendencies toward adversarial type of politics. The political developments described above allow us to argue that the benefits of the arrangement attributed to the general model in ECE countries as promoting 'procedural and partly value consensus' and teaching 'political leaders to craft and maintain coalitions, even if they have to be embedded in formalised coalition contracts' (Malová, 2002: 11) contribute also to the gradual convergence of the divided elite in Slovakia.

The case of the large Slovak coalition, however, also illustrates a more controversial aspect of the identified institutional set up: the effectiveness of coalition cabinet decision-making is low. Together with the Constitution, which provides for weak leadership by the Prime Minister, this results in a lower capacity to rule the country and exercise authority. Institutionalised weak leadership of the Prime Minister implies also a lack of control over the selection of ministers, as the nature of coalition government pro-

vides for political pressure from coalition partners (see Malová, 2002). In the case of the large Slovak coalition comprised of five political parties ranging from the centre-left to the centre-right of the political spectrum, it has hindered the reform of the state and public administration, and is responsible for slow legislative process. Regarding the EU requirements to pass many EU-related laws, the existing institutional set combined with the insufficiently settled elite is not so effective as is required by Slovakia's ambition to catch up with the other three countries in the EU-integration process.

Despite general obstacles of effectiveness, Dzurinda's government made progress in social and economic restructuring, which promoted Slovakia's attempts to join alliances it had been trying to join since independence. The entry of the Slovak Republic to the OECD in December 2000, and its invitation (extended in December 1999) to begin negotiations on full EU membership, were tangible fruit of these endeavours (Mesežnikov, 2001). Changes implemented in the institutional arrangements under the broad coalition (1998-2002) and particularly the substantial amendment of the Constitution function as even stronger constraints to any illiberal or non-democratic attempts. Moreover, the institutional framework is more favourable also due to the appointment of Constitutional Court justices for seven year terms ending in 2007, and a presidency backed by popular mandate. Finally, the process of integration over the past few years, including the extensive adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, has produced real changes in both politics and society, as does also economic transformation.

To answer the question how it happened that Slovakia has achieved the democratic consolidation we should not omit a very influential external factor – the EU conditionality. Since the 1998 elections the first Dzurinda government – in contrast to the former Mečiar government – demonstrated willingness to comply with the requirements of the EU and it provided the EU with a compelling influence over the Slovak political elites, pressing them to overcome the lack of value consensus. The common aspiration to EU membership has contributed to the gradual convergence of the

formerly disunited national elite and in this way overcome a crucial historical obstacle on the path to consolidated democracy.

2-4. Elections 2002: Accomplishment of the Early Consolidation

Before the 2002 parliamentary elections, domestic and foreign political players and observers voiced the opinion that ‘everything was at stake’, and that the elections might once again be a turning point. ‘At stake’ were especially Slovakia’s Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions and its efforts to make up the gap ensuing from its elimination from the first wave of NATO enlargement at the 1997 Madrid Summit, as well as from the group of top EU candidate countries due to its failure to fulfil the political criteria. When analyzing the party systems of different countries and their chances of creating effective ruling coalitions, most analysts no longer regarded Slovakia as an anomaly, but did continue to highlight the fact that coalition options were less predictable in Slovakia (compared to Hungary, for instance), and that there was greater uncertainty about post-election developments (Pridham, 2002: 99; Sitter, 2002: 93).

Although many domestic and foreign politicians before Slovakia’s most recent parliamentary elections dubbed them the most important in the country’s short history, it was obvious to any independent observer that they were not about the survival of democracy, but about how well it would work in the future (Szomolányi, 2002). Today we can say that the fifth free and democratic elections in Slovakia’s modern history were not crucial in the same sense as the preceding four. Part of the reason was that the 1998-2002 period had had a stabilizing influence on democracy, mostly because the broad ruling coalition had managed to remain in office until the end of its scheduled tenure, though at the cost of some difficulties in implementing the government programme. In surviving the full term until regular elections in 2002, the previous administration had created favourable political conditions for ‘continuing on the path of change’, which after the 1998 elections had returned Slovakia to stable democratic development.

The make-up of Mikuláš Dzurinda's second coalition government and its programme manifesto show signs of both continuity and change. For the first time in the history of free and democratic elections in Slovakia, the acting prime minister became the leader of the newly-elected government.¹⁸ This created favourable conditions for continuing the change that had been introduced after the 1998 elections. The fact that the prime minister remained the same is the main reason that analysts speak of continuity, although both the personnel roster of the cabinet and the composition of the governing parties changed, even in parties that were re-elected.¹⁹ The nature of the ruling coalition has also changed in the last five years, from one with a two-thirds (qualified) majority in parliament after the 1998 elections, to one supported by a simple majority shortly thereafter, and finally to a government supported by a bare majority after the 2002 elections.

The 2002 elections laid the groundwork for the formation of a new government consisting of centre-right forces – SDKÚ, SMK, KDH and ANO – as well as for the elimination of extreme nationalist forces from parliament, thus creating a breadth of consensus among the political elite that had never before been seen in the country's modern history. There are even signs of a shift from an inevitable procedural consensus towards a 'consensus on fundamental values', which is believed to indicate that democracy is working (Sartori, 1993: 92). This consensus is most visible in the field of Slovakia's foreign policy. The experience that three of these parties gained of coexistence with two leftist parties in the 1998-2002 ruling coalition undoubtedly taught them the virtue of the consensual style of politics. One minor worry is that the fourth

18 Until the September 2002 elections, not a single ruling party had managed to remain in government for a consecutive electoral term. In other words, all parliamentary elections in Slovakia's post-communist history had completely reshuffled the ruling coalition, both in the former Czechoslovakia (June 1992) and in independent Slovakia (1994 and 1998) (see Rybář, 2002b).

19 Many commentators erroneously describe the second Dzurinda administration as a 'renewed' one; if we use a strict definition of that adjective, we can apply it only to the prime minister, while the administration itself is new.

member of the coalition, the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO), does not have this experience and may become its ‘trouble-maker’.

The 2002 elections confirmed one more important fact: in the tenth year of Slovakia’s independence, Vladimír Mečiar no longer decides Slovakia’s political future. Still, Mečiar remains important for the future of his HZDS party; under his leadership in the 2002 elections, the HZDS received the largest share of the vote for the fourth consecutive time; at the same time, due to its almost zero coalition potential, it *de facto* lost the elections and remained in opposition for the second consecutive electoral term.

Last but not least, the electoral behaviour of a significant share of Slovak voters was surprisingly rational: they used their ballots strategically, and seemed well aware of the implications of their decisions, creating favourable conditions for the formation of a homogeneous centre-right government.

2-5. Electoral Participation and Representation

The most recent parliamentary elections in Slovakia were marked by relatively low voter participation (70.1 per cent) and a high share of forfeited ballots (18.2 per cent), which were originally cast for parties that did not qualify for parliament, and under Slovak law were subsequently redistributed among the successful parties. It is interesting that even the lowest voter turnout in Slovakia’s post-communist history was substantially higher than it was in Poland in 2001 (46 per cent) or the Czech Republic in 2002 (58 per cent), and almost matched Hungary’s highest-ever turnout. Some 25 political parties ran in the September elections, seven of which exceeded the five per cent support threshold for securing seats in parliament.

The combination of low turnout and the high percentage of forfeited ballots meant that the composition of the new parliament was actually determined by only 56.6 per cent of all eligible voters in Slovakia (Krivý, 2002). A comparison with elections held since 1990 shows that the current parliament is the least representative since the collapse of the communist regime; on the other hand, the elimination of a number of smaller parties from parliament reduced the previous assembly’s excessive fragmentation, and created

better conditions for the smooth operation of the new ruling coalition (SDKÚ, SMK, KDH and ANO) which is supported by only 78 deputies in the 150-seat house; the opposition parties (HZDS, Smer and KSS) control 72 seats.

It is difficult to identify any significant shifts in the electoral preferences of the Slovak population. However, it is evident that those population segments that were heavily mobilized in the past, and which supported the HZDS and SNS in particular, have been demobilized. The originally significant gap in voter turnout between the rural and urban populations began to close. Despite the general decline, voter turnout in large cities did not drop as dramatically as in smaller towns and villages; consequently, the share of Bratislava and Košice of the total number of ballots cast increased, and due to the above-average support in these cities for the SDKÚ, contributed heavily to the election success of centre-right parties.

Pre-election doomsday scenarios, in which the country's democratic development might be reversed, did not materialize, in part because the intense campaign by NGOs, along with the SDKÚ's non-confrontational election campaign, eventually succeeded in helping a substantial proportion of the disenchanted voters of the former SDK, especially urban ones, to overcome their disappointment and go to the polling stations. As a result, the SDKÚ is not only the strongest government party but also the strongest 'urban party'; while in smaller towns and villages it received only 7-8 per cent of the popular vote, in large cities it took as much as 33 per cent. On the other hand, the HZDS, the strongest opposition party, continues to draw support especially from villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (Krivý, 2002). Generally speaking, Slovakia has moved from the post-communist pattern of electoral behaviour, which can still be observed in belatedly or insufficiently modernized countries, towards a socio-economic model of electoral behaviour or political participation, which assumes that voter participation is directly proportional to people's level of education and income.

Most observers were surprised that the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) qualified for seats in parliament. However, the

party's election result (6.3 per cent) did not represent a dramatic change in the population's electoral preferences, especially given the fact that nationalist parties (for the first time in Slovakia's post-communist history), along with the HZD which had split off from Mečiar's HZDS, remained outside the parliament. Any of these parties could have created serious complications for the formation of the ruling coalition and the future working of parliament.

The KSS lured away some voters from the SDL as well as the SOP and HZDS, especially in eastern districts of the country with high unemployment (the same equation was seen in the case of the Czech communists). Perhaps ironically, the KSS' election success came on the heels of a general shift in Slovakia's party competition away from the 'national' issue and towards socio-economic issues, which in itself is positive for political stability as it enables society to focus on those structural problems whose solution is essential if the quality of life is to grow.

2-6. The Ethnic Principle and the Role of Mobilizing Party Elites

The election fiasco of both nationalist parties – the original SNS and the defected PSNS – indicated that the 'Hungarian card', which the SNS has played since 1990, no longer works. On the contrary, the SMK's performance in the first Dzurinda administration, where it was perhaps the most stable and predictable element during its tenure, made the party appealing even to some Slovak voters from larger cities, despite the fact it is primarily a rural party representing ethnic Hungarians. This factor, along with the traditionally high voter participation among ethnic Hungarians, explains the party's exceptionally good election result (11.16 per cent), which made it the second strongest governing party after the SDKÚ.

The electoral behaviour of Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians is interesting, and verifies the importance of the role played by party elites. On the one hand, the basic socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes of the SMK electorate resemble those of the HZDS electorate and of former SDL voters. On the other hand,

ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia are known for their traditionally strong support of Euro-Atlantic integration and democratic principles, which distinguishes them from HZDS voters.

In the most recent elections, the ethnic loyalty of SMK voters to a 'Hungarian party' gave the centre-right coalition a decisive edge. In other words, the superiority of the ethnic principle over the civic one caused a statistically significant group of socially and economically frustrated voters to turn away from populist or far-left parties and support a standard and pro-reform party. This shows that even ethnicity may be no obstacle to democratic consolidation if a pro-democratic party elite guides it.

2-6. Accountability and New Political Parties

As noted above, elections have an important function in allowing voters to hold both governing and opposition parties accountable for their actions. On many occasions, however, governing parties have failed to be re-elected despite their successful performance in office because they appeared less competent than the opposition, which may have won voters over with unrealistic promises. At other times, even poor governments get re-elected because they are judged better than a weak opposition.²⁰ Thus, accountability has to be defined interactively, not as the result of an evaluation of the government's performance in isolation (Markowski, 2001: 54).

One year before elections, most Slovak citizens evaluated the first Dzurinda administration as unsuccessful, a judgment that was repeatedly stated in public opinion polls.²¹ The extent of the dis-

20 When we examine government changes in Central and Eastern European countries, we see that governing parties that managed to restore their countries' macroeconomic and financial stability were subsequently sent packing in elections, mostly because voters did not forgive them for the unpopular measures they had had to take. Such was the case of Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria. In the former two countries, people chose a leftist alternative, while in Bulgaria they elected the charismatic Tsar Simeon, who was supported by young professionals from Western financial institutions.

21 In September 2001, the ratio of people who trusted and did not trust the cabinet was 29 per cent and 68 per cent meaning that the cabinet's credibility was even lower than that of the parliament or the president. At the

content was reflected in increasing support for new parties, especially Smer and ANO, which benefited from people's frustration with and protests against the performance of the ruling parties. At the same time, they provided an outlet for public discontent by seeming to permit a change in the composition of the government without allowing the HZDS to return to power, a prospect that was unacceptable to the former voters of the governing parties.

The repeated emergence and subsequent election success of new parties (the ZRS before the 1994 elections, the SOP before the 1998 elections, and Smer and ANO before the 2002 elections) is a clear indicator of the volatility, atomization, and structural instability that has characterized Slovakia's party system. Until the 2001 parliamentary elections in Poland, Slovakia was the only Visegrad 4 country in which the structural instability of the party system showed up in entries to parliament by new parties after each election. After four new parties entered the Polish *Sejm* in September 2001, however, and two governing parties were eliminated, Slovakia's case does not appear so extraordinary. Besides, compared to the extremist populism of Self-Defense and the League of Polish Families, the centrist populism of Smer and ANO appears almost harmless

The hypothesis that Smer and ANO represented a viable political alternative for many disenchanting voters was verified by polls in which ANO and Smer voters gave the following reasons for supporting these parties: 'I want to see somebody else in government'; 'the parties there so far have disappointed me'; 'I am not satisfied with the current administration'; 'it is a new party'; 'let there be change'. As we noted above, the awareness among voters that there is a real alternative to the government is essential if the political mechanism of accountability is to work properly in elections. If, on the other hand, a large part of the voting public does not see a true alternative, they may decide not to vote. This was probably the case recently in Poland and the Czech Republic.

same time, 66 per cent of respondents said Slovakia was heading in a 'somewhat or totally wrong' direction (Gyárfášová and Velšic, 2001: 253, 241).

In this comparative perspective, the 70 per cent voter turnout in Slovakia was surprisingly high, given that widespread political cynicism, and the belief that no true alternative exists, tend to reduce ‘accountability potential among the masses’ (Markowski, 2001: 56) and cause people to distrust political institutions. This distrust was measured in Slovakia shortly before the 2002 elections; distrust in the president outweighed trust by a 53:43 ratio, while in parliament it was 71:23, in the cabinet 74:23, and in the Constitutional Court 46:41 (see Gyárfašová and Velšic, 2002: 301).²² Given the structure of Slovakia’s party system, the two alternative parties had a positive impact on the system, regardless of their politics, because they helped to legitimize and strengthen democracy in Slovakia.

2-7. Identity versus Interests

The results of the fifth free and democratic elections in Slovakia indicate that after ten years of Slovak independence, the issue of national identity as stressed by extremist SNS and PSNS leaders is not as capable of mobilizing voters as it once was during the 1990s. The principal reason for this is not only the prickly personalities of the nationalist leaders and the disintegration of their original party, but also a change in conditions. The existence of independent Slovakia as the main guarantor of the national identity of the Slovaks has gradually reduced the need for a nationalist party in the eyes of its supporters. In other words, ‘if the identity of an ethnic group is guaranteed in the long term, the nation as the primary source of thymotic identification [i.e. that which sates its desire for recognition] begins to lose its significance’ (Fukuyama, 2002: 259).

22 Compared to the general level of trust in political institutions in Central and Eastern European countries, Slovakia still ranks above the average. In Central and Eastern Europe, the level of public distrust of political institutions is almost twice as high as in the European Union; in the case of parliament it is 79.4 per cent, and in the case of the cabinet it is 78.4 per cent, while in EU member states the average distrust reaches 41 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively (Splichal, 2001: 16).

Naturally, this is a two way street, meaning that Slovakia's continuing European integration and its full EU membership after May 1st, 2004 involving as they do the surrender of some national sovereignty to the Union, may easily create room for the agendas of nationalist-populist parties. The approaching date of Slovakia's actual accession to the EU may bring the issue of identity (national, ethnic or cultural) into the public debate on the Union, which has yet to be fully launched.²³ Whipping up people's fears of losing their national identity is an extremely emotive way of mobilizing electoral support, especially when the public is already uneasy about price increases and the impact of social reforms, and at the same time is confronted with an unfamiliar outside world. The same challenges desired by better prepared and more adaptable individuals from younger generations are often the main source of anxiety for less prepared and less adaptable members of older generations.

Conclusion

Were the 2002 parliamentary elections the last in a succession of ballots that provoked uncertainty and fear about Slovakia's future? Under the achieved constitutional consolidation and consensual national elite that is likely. A significant indicator of the achieved level of democratic consolidation is the fact that the

23 The frequently noted absence of a broad and erudite political debate over the practical implications of Slovakia's EU membership – be it among the country's political elite or within the general public – is a natural consequence of the previous problems Slovakia had to cope with. As of October 2002, public support for EU integration was substantially higher in Slovakia (77.3 per cent) than in the Czech Republic or Poland; in January 2003, Slovakia surpassed even Hungary. This support among Slovaks is based on their general desire to join the EU, rather than on their detailed knowledge of the concrete implications of accession. Only after the 2002 election results confirmed the irreversibility of Slovakia's democratic development, and the country was officially incorporated into the next enlargement wave, did space open for European integration to become one of the principal issues of political and public discourse. However, this discourse cannot possibly focus on all the problems at once, since no country is capable of absorbing it.

second Dzurinda coalition survival is no longer essential to the survival of Slovak democracy itself. However, it is impossible to exclude other reasons for uncertainty, not only because the social sciences cannot read the future, but also because recent developments in ‘old democracies’ such as the Netherlands, France and Austria show that even consolidated democracies are dynamic systems that are not immune to malfunctions and imbalances. On the other hand, as old democracies they are learning systems, and therefore possess great ability to recover their equilibrium. To achieve the same ability ought to be an aspiration of the new Central European democracies to which Slovakia now belongs.

The fundamental question formulated in the introduction, ‘how it happened and what factors have become crucial for Slovakia’s turning back to democratic consolidation’ or to put it in other words ‘what have compensated the historic cumulation of less favourable conditions for democratic consolidation’ may be answered in a nutshell as follows. The consolidated democracy in Slovakia has resulted from complex dynamics with domestic constraints – namely the institutional framework partly maintained from the phase of the common Czechoslovak transition, the gradual convergence of an initially unsettled elite, the democratic political learning at the mass level and strong public support for EU membership, and the ‘right choices’ of the elite actors at the ‘right time’ – as well as European pressures on the governing elites to comply with requirements of the EU.

References

- Ágh, A. and Sándor, K. K. (1998), ‘The Parliamentary Elections in 1998: A Comparative History of the Hungarian Elections in the Nineties’, *Papers on Democratic Transition* (Budapest), 232.
- Bútorá, M., Krivý, V. and Szomolányi, S. (1989), *Positive Deviation: the Career of a Concept and the Epidemiology of a Phenomena in Czecho-Slovakia in the Late Eighties*, Bratislava: Mimeo.
- Bútorová, Z. (ed.) (1998), *Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia: A Public Opinion Profile of a Country in Transition*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs.
- Carpenter, M. (1997), ‘Slovakia and the Triumph of Nationalist Populism’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 30(2): 205-20.

- Dahrendorf, R. (1994), 'Svoboda a sociální vazby', in *Liberální společnost*, Praha: FÚ ČSAV.
- Duleba, A. (1997), 'Democratic Consolidation and the Conflict over Slovak International Alignment', in *Slovakia: Problems of Democratic Consolidation and the Struggle over the Rules of the Game*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 209-230.
- Elster, J., Offe, C. and Preuss, U. K. (1998), *Institutional Design in Post-Communist Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- European Commission (1997), *Agenda 2000 - Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application for Membership of the European Union*, Brussels.
- Evans, G. and Whitefield, S. (1998), 'The Structuring of Political Cleavages in Post-Communist Societies: the Case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia', *Political Studies*, 46, 115-139.
- Fish, S. M. (1999), 'The End of Mečiarism', *East European Constitutional Review* (Winter/Spring 1999), 47-55.
- Fukuyama, F. (2002), *Koněc dějin a poslední člověk*, Praha: Rybka Publishers.
- Gyárfášová, O., Krivý, V., Velšic, M. et al. (2001), *Krajina v pohybe. Správa o politických názoroch a hodnotách ľudí na Slovensku*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs.
- Gyárfášová, O. and Velšic, M. (2001), 'Verejná mienka', in Kollár, M. and Mesežnikov, G. (eds.), *Slovensko 2001: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 241-284.
- Heinrich, H. (1999), *Institution Building in the New Democracies*, Interim report on a project conducted by a research group at the Collegium, Budapest.
- Higley, J. and Burton, M. G. (1989), 'The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns', *American Sociological Review*, 54, 17-32.
- Higley, J., Kullberg, J. and Pakulski, J. (1996), 'The Persistence of Postcommunist Elites', *Journal of Democracy*, 7(2).
- Higley, J. and Pakulski, J. (1995), 'Elite Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 30, 415-435.
- Huntington, S. P. (1991), *The Third Wave*, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Janos, A. C. (2000), *East Central Europe in the Modern World: The Politics of Borderland from Pre- to Post Communism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kitschelt, H. (1995), 'The Formation of Party Cleavages in Post-Communist Democracies: Theoretical Propositions', *Party Politics*, 1(4), 447-472.

- Kitschelt, H., Mansfeldová, Z., Markowski, R. and Tóka, G. (1999), *Post-Communist Party Systems: Competition, Representation and Inter-Party Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krause, K. D., (2000), 'Public Opinion and Party Choice in Slovakia and the Czech Republic' *Party Politics*, 6(1), 23-46.
- Krivý, V. (1995), 'Local Determinants of Voting Behaviour', in *Localities and Politics in the Transformation Process: The Czech and Slovak Experiences*, Bratislava: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Krivý, V. (1997), 'Regionálne súvislosti formovania režimu', in Szomolányi, S. (ed.), *Slovensko: problémy konsolidácie demokracie: Spor o pravidlá hry pokračuje*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 101-113.
- Krivý, V. (2002), 'Výsledky parlamentných volieb 2002' in Kollár, M. and Mesežnikov, G. (eds.), *Slovensko 2002: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 127-154.
- Landman, T. (2003), *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics*, London: Routledge.
- Leff, S. C. (1999), 'Democratization and Disintegration in Multinational States: The Breakup of the Communist Federations', *World Politics*, 51, 205-35.
- Linz, J. and Stepan, A. (1996), *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Malová, D. (2001), 'From the Ambiguous Constitution to the Dominance of Informal Rules', in Zielonka, J. (ed.) *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Malová, D. and Haughton, T. (2002), 'Making Institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Impact of Europe', *West European Politics*, 25(2), 101-120.
- Markowski, R. (2001), 'Democratic Consolidation and Accountability: News from Eastern and Central European Democracies', in Markowski, R. and Wnuk-Lipinski, E. (eds.), *Transformative Paths in Central and Eastern Europe*, Warsaw: ISP PAN, 47-72.
- Mesežnikov, G. and Bútorá, M. (1997), *Slovenské referendum '97: zdroj, priebeh, následky*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs.
- Mesežnikov, G. (1998), 'Vnútropolitický vývoj a systém politických strán', in Bútorá, M. and Ivantyšyn, M. (eds.), *Slovensko 1997: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti a trendoch na rok 1998*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs.
- Leonardo M. (1995), 'Democratic Consolidation: Definition and Models', in: Pridham, G. (ed.), *Transitions to Democracy : Comparative Perspectives from Southern Europe, Latin America and Eastern Europe*, Aldershot: Dartmouth.

- O'Donnel, G. and Schmitter, P. (1986), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Olson, D. M. (1993), 'Political Parties and Party Systems in Regime Transformation: Inner Transition in the New Democracies of Central Europe', *The American Review of Politics*, 14, 619-658.
- Pridham, G. (1999), 'Complying with the European Union's Democratic Conditionality: Transnational Party Linkages and Regime Change in Slovakia, 1993-1998', *Europa-Asia Studies*, 51(7).
- Pridham, G. (2002), 'Coalition Behaviour in New Democracies of Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of Slovakia', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 18(2), 75-102.
- Rustow, D. (1970), 'Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model', *Comparative Politics*, 2, 337-363.
- Rybář, M. (2002), 'Nestabilnosť stranického systému a voľby 2002', *Listy SPPA*, (July-August), 6-7.
- Sitter, N. (2002), 'When is a Party System? A Systems Perspective on the Development of Competitive Party Systems in East Central Europe', *Central European Political Science Review*, 3(7), 75-97.
- Sitter, N. (2001), 'Beyond Class vs. Nation? Cleavage Structures and Party Competition in Central Europe', *Central European Political Science Review*, 2(3).
- Splichal, S. (2001), 'Imitation and Distrust Hamper the Democratisation of the Media in East-Central Europe', *European Political Science*, 1(1).
- Rona-Tas, A., Bunčák, J. and Harmadyová, V. (1999), 'Post-Communist Transformation and the New Elite in Slovakia', *Sociology*, 31(3).
- Schmitter, P. (1997), 'Clarifying Consolidation', *Journal of Democracy*, 8(2).
- Stepanov, R. (1999), 'Semiprezidentský systém', *OS*, 5.
- Szomolányi, S. (1994a), 'Introduction: a Transition to Democracy?' in Szomolányi, S. and Mesežnikov, G. (eds.), *The Slovak Path of Transition – to Democracy?*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association and Interlingua, 5-12.
- Szomolányi, S. (1994b), 'Does Slovakia Deviate from the Central European Variant of Transition?', in Szomolányi, S. and Mesežnikov, G. (eds.), *Slovakia: Parliamentary Elections 1994. Causes – Consequences – Prospects*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 11-37.
- Szomolányi, S. (1997b), 'Identifying Slovakia's emerging regime', in Szomolányi, S. and Gould, J. A. (eds.), *Slovakia: Problems of Democratic Consolidation. The Struggle for the Rules of the Game*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 9-23.

- Szomolányi, S. (1999), 'Slovakia's Transition Path and the 1998 Elections' in Bútorá, M., Mesežnikov, G., Bútorová, Z. and Fisher, S. (eds.): *The 1998 Parliamentary Elections and Democratic Rebirth in Slovakia*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 25-38).
- Szomolányi, S. (2002), 'Voľby budú o efektívite, nie o prežití demokracie', *Listy SFPA*, (July-August), 8-9.
- Wasilewski, J. (1998), 'Hungary, Poland, and Russia: The Fate of Nomenclature Elites', in Dogan, M. and Higley, J. (eds), *Elites, Crises and the Origins of Regimes*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Zakaria, F. (1997), 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6).
- Zielonka, J. (ed.) (2001), *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford Press.

Abbreviations

AZZZ	Association of Employers' Unions and Federations
DU	Democratic Union
DS	Democratic Party
HZDS	Movement for Democratic Slovakia
KDH	Christian Democratic Movement
KOZ	Confederation of Trade Unions
SDK	Slovak Democratic Coalition
SDKÚ	Slovak Democratic Christian Union
SDL	Party of the Democratic Left
SDSS	Social Democratic Party of Slovakia
SOPK	The Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Smer	Direction
SMK	Hungarian Coalition Party
SNS	Slovak National Party
SOP	Party of Civil Understanding
SV	Common Choice, comprised SDL and SDSS
SZS	Green Party of Slovakia
VPN	Public Against Violence
ZRS	Association of Slovakia's Workers