



The First Attempt of the Slovak Republic for Regionalisation, or the Administrative Reform of 1996

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Abstract. The ‘velvet revolution’ of 1989 put an end to communism in Czechoslovakia, the regime dominated by the communist party collapsed within days. The ever worsening relationship between the Czech and the Slovak inhabitants of the country eventually led to the disintegration of the state itself; on January 1, 1993 the Czech and the Slovak Republics came into being.

The present paper is aimed at investigating the first administrative reform of the Slovak Republic, ratified on July 24, 1996 (act 221/1996), as well as the phenomena that had preceded it. During our research a special emphasis was laid on introducing the issue of how the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia was affected and discriminated by the reform.

Keywords: history of Slovakia, minority question, Hungarian minority in Slovakia, Mečiar as a prime minister.

1. Introduction

Communism in Czechoslovakia came to an end with the ‘velvet revolution’ of 1989 and the regime dominated by the communist party collapsed within days, a situation which meant that the changing of the political system could immediately take momentum. In the meantime the relationship between the Czech and the Slovak inhabitants of the country was worsening and this situation eventually led to the disintegration of the state itself; on January 1, 1993 the Czech and the Slovak

Republics came into being. Our research is aimed at investigating the first administrative reform of the Slovak Republic, ratified on July 24, 1996 (act 221/1996), inclusive of the phenomena that had preceded it. During our research a special emphasis was laid on introducing the issue of how the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia was affected and discriminated by the reform.

2. The Czechoslovak heritage 1968-1992

In the communist era state and local governments did not exist separately; the communist party exercised power through the institution of the National Front. It was also the National Front that nominated representatives who were then eligible for being elected and, following the formal elections they were the ones who eventually had to carry out the orders of the communist party.

From 1969 to 1990 three administrative levels existed in Slovakia (see Map 1). The top level was the area level, and there were four of that in the country. The middle level was the district level, and there were 38 of this. On bottom level there were the 2700 settlements. The communist party set up the so-called National Council in each area, each district and settlement and exercised power through them. The system of national councils ceased to exist in 1990 under the proposition of the Czech and Slovak National Councils. Under the new laws (act 369/1990 and act 472/1990) the administrative system of Slovakia was fully transformed (Petőcz 1998).

Map 1. Areas and districts in Slovakia 1968-1991



Source: Petőcz, 1998. p.112.

Act 369/1990 eliminated the national committees and separated state- and local-level administration. State administrative tasks were delegated to district level, while the individual settlements were legally administered by local governments. This is a dual model, in which state administrative tasks are

performed by districts, while the settlements acquire local administrative roles (Józsa 2004).

Act 472/1990 abolished the level of districts within state administration, while it left the 38 zones intact and within each of them 2-4 smaller administrative units were organised. As a result, a total of 121 administrative zones came into being. The administrative spheres of authority were divided among regional offices, preferably in such a way that citizens could do their official business as close to their place of residence as possible (Petőcz 1998). According to specialists, it was due to these two laws that the Slovak administrative system of the era approached Western European norms (Petőcz 1998).

At the same time the question of further reforms was also raised. A parliamentary committee, commissioned by Ján Čarnogurský, the Slovak prime minister from April 1991-June 1992, proposed continued administrative reforms in May 1992. According to that proposal, in the Slovak part of former Czechoslovakia 16 counties were to be established, and within them the establishment of 77 smaller districts was proposed. Historical traditions, geographical conditions and economic as well as social needs were to be taken into consideration when reorganising the country's administrative units. It was also decided that the administrative units were to have approximately the same number of inhabitants. In addition, the counties were to have been governed by elected local governments (Mezei 2004).

The committee's proposal was not put to debate, because prime minister Ján Čarnogurský, who emphasised the role of counties in his administrative policy, was soon to leave the political scene and he was followed by Vladimír Mečiar in June 1992 (Kováč 1996). During the second Mečiar government (the first Mečiar government ruled from June 1990 until April 1991) the issue of the formation of the county system was removed from the agenda. At the same time Mečiar contributed to the sharpening of the debates in relation to the afterlife of the Czechoslovak state, and as a result of his political views the conflict between Czechs and Slovaks became the centre of home politics. This conflict remained unsolved and this situation eventually resulted in the breaking up of the Czechoslovak state (Hamberger 1997, Gulyás 2005).

3. General characteristics of the Mečiar era (1992-1998)

The Slovak Republic, which became independent on January 1, 1993, was defined by the constitution of the country as a Slovak state despite the fact that a considerable number of minorities – about 15% – lived in the country. (See Table 1.) The period from 1993 to 1998 was defined by the increasingly dominant Slovak nationalism (Gulyás 2005). This political trend was most characteristically represented by the figure of Vladimír Mečiar, who, during the investigated period, functioned as the country's prime minister on two occasions. Considering the

dates, June 24, 1992 – March 11, 1994 was the period of the second Mečiar government, and then from March 15, 1994 to October 1, 1994 was the period of the government of Josef Moravčík, and eventually, October 1, 1994 – October 10, 1998 was the period of the third Mečiar government.

As it can be concluded from the above dates, the new government led by Jozef Moravčík proved to be short-lived, thus, except for a brief period of four and a half months, it was practically Vladimír Mečiar who was the country's prime minister for a six-year period from 1992 up to 1998. The most characteristic feature of that period was that Mečiar and his party – especially during his third term – in addition to political key positions, also dominated the media, and during this period the electronic media actually functioned as the mouthpiece of the government. Mečiar also tried to control the country's economy, especially privatisation processes (Kovač 1996; Lesko 1998). In these attempts the democratic rights were often abused and it was also the period of several unlawful acts. The most scandalous of these was that the secret service kidnapped the son of the president, that person's who functioned as counterbalance to Mečiar in political life (August 1995). In addition, the two investigators of the case were also removed from their jobs, and eventually a person related to the crown witness was murdered, too. The European Union and the United States attempted to warn Mečiar in a diplomatic way but neither of these attempts brought any result of significance. Due to these characteristics, the early Mečiar era can be evaluated as a negative period in the history of the young Slovak state. Slovakia's domestic politics and the country's economic development were very different from the political practices of the other three countries of the 'Visegrád Four' (V4). As a result, in 1999 Slovakia was not considered for NATO membership during the first round of NATO enlargement. The situation was the same with EU membership, since by 1998 Slovakia was excluded from the group of candidate countries, too (Boross 2000/a).

Table 1. Ethnic composition of Slovakia based on the 1991 census figures

Nationality/ethnicity	Number	%
Slovak	4,606,125	85.7%
Hungarian	578,408	10.8%
Czech	65,216	1.1%
Ruthenian-Ukrainian	38,979	0.7%
Romany	80,627	1.6%
Other	1,163	0.03
Total	5,289,608	100.00%

Source: Kovac, 1996. pp. 312-313.

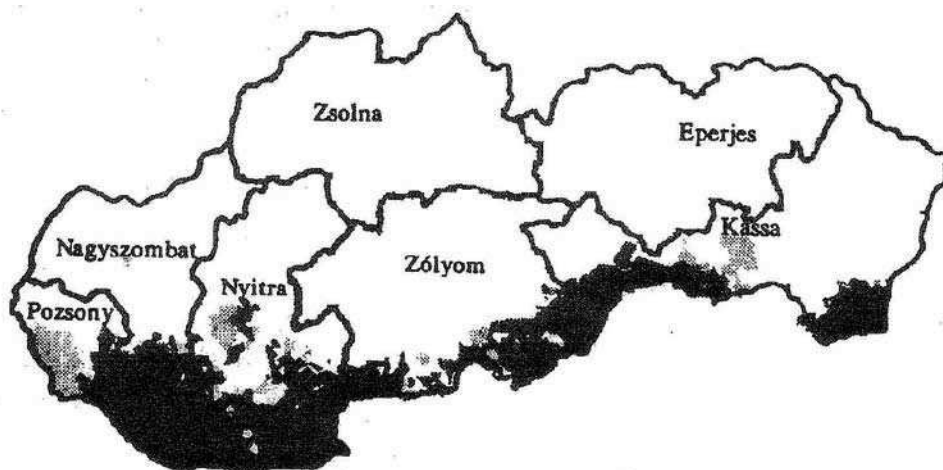
In the Mečiar era serious problems emerged in the relationship between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. The Mečiar governments radically cut the state funding of minority culture and many people, who considered themselves Hungarian, were dismissed from their jobs in the government sector, and renewed attacks were carried out by the government against minority education (Boros 2000/B). In addition, using the new legislation related to the use of Slovak as the only state language, the official use of Hungarian was made impossible in administration. Since this problem is very complicated, a paper of this length cannot fully explore the complexity of the language problem; instead, as it was stated in the title, those steps taken by the Mečiar government will be examined which had a disadvantageous impact on the Hungarian population.

4. The Mečiar governments and the administrative reform

4.1. The draft of 1993

Mečiar recognised those political opportunities which lay in the restructuring of the country's administrative system. He tried to change Slovakia's administrative system in order to be able to grant key positions to his own party. This attempt can very well be seen in the fact that he replaced act 472/1990 with 487/1992 (Petőcz 1998). While under act 472/1990, ratified by the Czechoslovak state, the administrative leader of any district had been elected by the mayors of the settlements of the given district, Mečiar's act of 487/1992 modified it and said that the administrative leader was appointed by the leader of the area in which the district is situated. Since the leaders of the individual areas were appointed by the government itself, by modifying the former law, the government acquired the right to appoint the regional administrators in all 121 administrative districts. It is also obvious that the second Mečiar government filled all these positions with its own people. Mečiar also intended to use the restructuring of the administrative system as a weapon against the Hungarian minority. At the end of 1993 the second Mečiar government prepared the concept of the division of the country into 7 administrative regions (See Map 2.)

Map 2. The proposal of the 2nd Mečiar government for Slovakia's regional division



Source: Petőcz, 1998 pp. 118.

Seven regions were proposed by Mečiar and there were Hungarian minorities in five of those. There was no Hungarian community of considerable size in the area of Žilina (Zsolna) and Prešov (Eperjes). The number and proportion of ethnic Hungarians is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The number and proportion of ethnic Hungarians in the proposed regions of 1993

Name of the region	Total population number	Number of Hungarians	Proportion of Hungarians
Bratislava	588,059	30,083	5.12%
Trnava	810,538	157,919	19.48%
Nitra	893,448	196,149	21.95%
Zvolen	634,343	84,682	13.35%
Kosice	836,004	96,343	11.52%

Source: Petőcz, 1998. pp. 119.

In order to interpret the table it is important to consider that according to the language laws of 1990, as well as the 1994 law regulating the use of sign boards, 20% is the limit in any settlement for practicing minority rights. It means that in a given settlement if the number of ethnic population exceeds 20%, those who belong to the minority can use their own language in local administration and they can use bilingual sign boards within the limits of the settlement. From the table it is

evident that Mečiar's intention was to keep the number of ethnic Hungarians below 20% in the proposed regions, thus in four of those, except for the Nitra region, they would not have been able to exercise their rights (Petőcz, 1998).

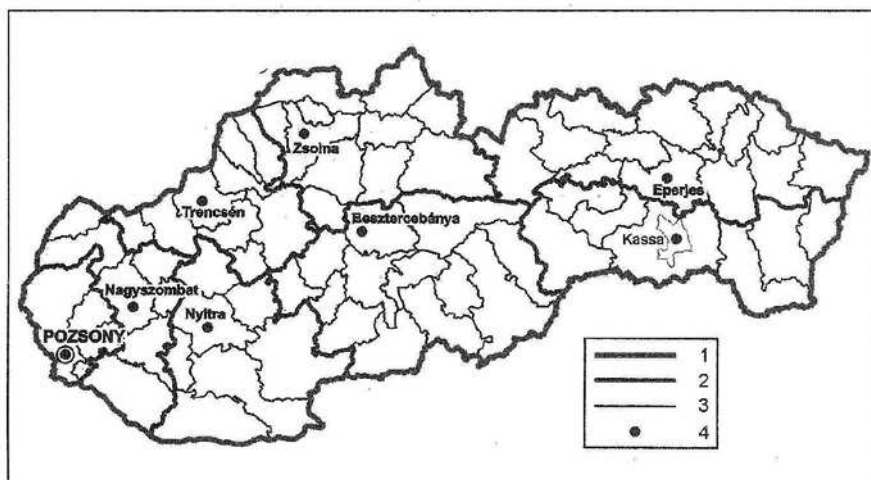
4.2. The administrative reform of 1996

Mečiar's third government, which came into office in October 1994 (Boros 2000/c) put the problem of administrative reform on the agenda again. This step caused the relationship between the government and the Hungarian minority to change from bad to worse. Two issues need to be considered in this respect. The first is that although the third Mečiar government signed an agreement of cordiality with Hungary in March 1995, a document called the Slovak-Hungarian Charter, they did not even make an attempt at keeping it; they treated the Hungarian minority with hostility (Boros 2000/d). The law on language rights of 1995 purposely discriminated against ethnic Hungarians. At the same time the Hungarian minority of Slovakia elaborated a different version of the administrative reform, which suited their interests better (Szarka 2001). There is no opportunity to describe the Hungarian version in details within the framework of this paper but the most significant characteristics of it will be given below.

According to the resolution of the general assembly of Komarno of January 6, 1994, a unified 'Hungarian' region was to be established in those areas of southern Slovakia in which Hungarians constitute the majority. The Party of the Hungarian Coalition developed the idea further and submitted the new version in the 1996 parliamentary debates of the administrative reform. At the same time the draft proposal of the Union of Towns was also being elaborated, a proposal aimed at creating 16 counties and 78 districts within them (Petőcz 1998). On the other hand the third Mečiar government also submitted a draft proposal according to which Slovakia was to be divided into 8 regions and 79 districts. In the parliamentary debates the faction of the government party turned down both proposals, those by the Hungarian Coalition Party and by the Union of Towns. The president – because of the special status of Bratislava – returned the proposal to the parliament for a new debate. Following a lengthy debate, the parliament eventually approved it with amendments on July 7, 1996.

Mečiar intended to strengthen his own political power by establishing the 8 administrative regions in such a way that he could 'reward' those regions in which his party had won (e.g. the Trenčín region) and 'punish' the ones (the Prešov and Banská Bystrica regions for example) where his party had lost.

Map 3. The regional division of Slovakia in 1996.



Jelmagyarázat: 1 – Országhatár; 2 – Kerületi határ; 3 – Járáshatár; 4 – Kerületi székhely.

Legend: 1. country border; 2. district border; 3. zone border; 4. district centre

Source: Horváth 2004, p. 428.

The next question to be examined was what changes the administrative reform held for the Hungarian minority. When drawing the region's borders, the Mečiar government abused the principle of ethnicity on several occasions. Two facts are of major significance in this respect. One is that the Csallóköz region, populated by Hungarians, was divided into two parts and it was shared between Trnava and Nitra regions. That is, the Slovak government deliberately fragmented those areas which were homogeneously inhabited by Hungarians. By doing so, the Slovak government abused a basic international principle, according to which governments should refrain from changing the ethnic proportion of inhabitants living in multiethnic areas. On the other hand in mixed-population regions it was the Slovak towns situated above the Hungarian language border which were designated as regional centers. For example in the Banská Bystrica region it was the town of Banská Bystrica in the north that acquired the leading role, as opposed to the Hungarian towns of Rimaszombat (Rimavská Sobota) or Losonc (Lučenec) in the south. In Trnava and Nitra regions the regional centers were also located in the far north, and it meant that the Hungarian inhabitants of the southern areas had to travel great distances to attend to their business in the offices of the regional centre.

If the administrative reform of 1996 is examined from the point of view of the individual districts – for details see the research by Kálmán Petőcz (Petőcz 1998) – the conclusion can be drawn that the intention was to put the Hungarian minority in

a disadvantageous position. Two facts are of special significance in this respect. One is that the area as well as the number of inhabitants is bigger in the southern districts, which are inhabited by Hungarians, than in the northern ones, populated by Slovaks. This means that when developmental funds are distributed by districts, the proportionately larger and more populous southern districts get less. The second important fact is that when designating towns to become district centers, the towns with Slovak majority became district centers in larger numbers than the Hungarian towns. Out of a total of 15 towns with Hungarians in majority, it was only two that did become district centers.

In conclusion it can be stated that the Mečiar administrative reform of 1996 meant a definite disadvantage for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, both on regional and on district level.

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