

THE SLOVAK NATIONAL PARTY AS A POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SLOVAKS (1871–1914)

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The article deals with the basic characteristics of one of the chief functions of the Slovak National Party (SNS) between 1871 and 1914 as a political subject representing the national emancipatory interests of the Slovaks in the old Kingdom of Hungary (Uhorsko). Those interests were based on the principle of national sovereignty and expressed demands for political and state-legal recognition of national identity in terms of the principles of the equality of nations.

It is not necessary to emphasize the fact that from the 1848–1849 revolution onwards the Slovak nation-emancipatory politics was represented by a line which had principally been formulated by the Štúr generation in the programme document Demands of the Slovak Nation (*Žiadosti slovenského národa*) in 1848 and later, in 1861, in the Memorandum of the Slovak Nation (*Memorandum národa slovenského*). It was just that line which the Slovak National Party (SNS) followed from its establishment in 1871 up to the adoption of the Declaration of the Slovak nation (*Deklarácia slovenského národa*) on October 30, 1918.¹ After the dissolution of the Party of Compromise (*Strana vyrovnania*), which had represented the group known as the New Slovak School (*Nová škola slovenská*) in 1875, the SNS was actually the only Slovak political party until 1913, when the *Slovenská ľudová strana* (Slovak People's Party) was constituted. It should be mentioned that the Slovak Social Democratic Party was actually part of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party with the exception of a short period of 1905–1906, when it operated as an independent organization.

The particular importance of the SNS in its struggle for the recognition of national identity is strengthened by the fact that Slovak nation, as a sovereign subject, had no state, political or other autonomous institution or body (except for the Slo-

¹ A more detailed account of the activities of the party is given in the monograph PODRIMAVSKÝ, M.: *Slovenská národná strana XIX. storočia*. Bratislava 1983.

vak National Council during the 1848–49 Slovak Uprising) which would have fulfilled the function of the representation of the nation in terms of constitutional or political understanding, as is known for example from the 1861 Vienna Slovak Memorandum. The Martin Memorandum and the provision of the Standing National Committee at the Slovak National Assembly document that the creation of national representation on a constitutional basis was legitimately expected to follow from the demands for the development of the system of Slovak autonomy. Its activities would also have been connected with the constitutionally defined territory which was confirmed by the institution of the Regional Assembly anchored in the Proposal of the Privileged Covenant on the Establishment and Organization of a Special Slovak District (Okolie) as part of the Vienna Memorandum.²

All the activities of the SNS were based on the principles of the national sovereignty of the Slovaks anchored in the 1861 Memorandum. Of course, not all the demands of the programme of the Memorandum were systematically enforced in practice for tactical reasons. It is important, however, that the SNS always understood the fundamental Memorandum requirements as a strategic goal of the Slovak national emancipation process since their implementation would create, even in dual Austria-Hungary and in the event of the necessary constitutional changes in the Kingdom of Hungary, a necessary constitutional, political and cultural space for shaping and creating the attributes of national identity. It should be emphasized that the SNS saw the real solution to the Slovak question, with respect to the objective power-political situation in the Monarchy and in Central Europe, in the framework of the constitutional reconstruction of the Kingdom of Hungary so that the identity of all the nations would be respected on an equal basis.

The SNS embodied a national programme of a universal character within the existing context, since it defended the basic and necessary prerequisites for the preservation of national sovereignty. The fact that the SNS prioritized conditions of a constitutional character evidences that it considered the process of further shaping and strengthening of the attributes of the nation as an organic phenomenon for expressing the national identity which could fully be manifested only in such constitutional and political conditions that would simultaneously create the necessary guarantees for its protection.

In this sense it was quite logical that the constitutional dimension of national interests was the SNS's priority since Slovak exigencies were based on the natural legal principles of the nation's sovereignty and equality. Their anchoring in the con-

² The importance of the Memorandum národa slovenského (Memorandum of the Slovak nation) is analysed in the collection where documents of the Slovak National Assembly are also published, ELIÁŠ, M. (ed.): *Z prameňov národa*. Martin 1988. The Vienna Memorandum is described in RAPANT, D.: *Viedenské memorandum slovenské z roku 1861*. Turč. Sv. Martin 1943. Its Slovak text was published by BOKES, F. (ed.): *Dokumenty k slovenskému národnému hnutiu v rokoch 1848–1914. I. 1848–1867*. Bratislava 1962, pp. 363–377.

stitutional arrangements of the Kingdom of Hungary would have eliminated the prerogatives of the Hungarian or Magyar nation and opened the space for the participation of the non-Magyar nations in the control of state and state-forming entities. Naturally, their identity would also have been recognized and the application of appropriate rights for the development of emancipatory activities in all regions of social life would have been strengthened.

The political activities of the SNS had three interconnected aspects within the existing constitutional conditions when the ruling power enforced the doctrine of the unitary Hungarian (Magyar) political nation through a variety of vehicles:

The first aspect is national defence, by which the SNS reacted to the programme tendency and systematic procedures in all areas of social life to transform multinational Hungary into the state of the Magyar nation, within which the identity of the Slovaks as a nation would be lost with all its consequences for the future.

The second is the nation-constituting aspect, by which the SNS supported the creation of strong inner bonds within the national community in order to act in the process of cultivating the attributes of national distinctiveness in all areas of social activities. This chiefly concerned the programme questions of Slovak politics, organisational structures and particular political actions, which demonstrated efforts to fully apply Slovak national identity.

The third is the nation-representative aspect, since the SNS, as a political subject, represented and supported essential national interests and in this sense it fulfilled the function of the representative of the Slovaks. This role of the SNS occurred particularly within the context of cooperation and coalition links between the Slovaks, Rumanians, and Serbs since they were also represented by national political parties. This function was later applied in special relations to the Czech political circles. Of course, the SNS could not execute this function in relation to the Hungarian state and governmental institutions and bodies since the Hungarian legal order and the established political system did not admit the existence of any official national or political representations of non-Magyar nations,³ which followed from the fact that those nations were not recognized as distinct entities and thus no corresponding position and rights were awarded to them.

When the SNS did not take part in the struggle for seats in parliament (1878, 1884, 1887, 1892 and 1896), it expressed primarily protest against the nationality policy in the Kingdom of Hungary and against the discrimination against the Slovak population in their attitudes, which, in principle, explained its electoral passivity. In spite of the non-participation of the SNS in elections and the absence of active forms of political activities in the 1880s, the representatives of the SNS wrote about a wide variety of issues of a national emancipatory character in the *Národné*

³ This problem is discussed in the study of POTEĽMRA, M.: *Právne postavenie Slovenskej národnej strany v Uhorsku*. Historický časopis, 23, 1977, pp. 77–96.

noviny, which is considered to be the press organ of the SNS. They accentuated the necessity of cultivating the components of social life that participated in creating and strengthening the awareness of national identity of the Slovak community, historical, cultural, and spiritual values which shaped and fulfilled the identity in the attributes of a sovereign national entity. The nation-defensive aspect of the activities of the SNS and the strategies of its political passivity mainly in relation to Hungarian state and governmental institutions demonstrated on the one hand the non-existence of any basic legal and political preconditions for the Slovak nation to implement its natural national rights following from the recognition of its identity; on the other hand, however, the nation-constituting aspect retreated to the background at that time, because the political activities of the SNS did not develop, with the exception of political journalism, into any systematic form also including more intense political activity outside the centre of the town of Martin.

From the beginning of the 1890s, there were gradual but rather significant changes taking place within the SNS, which finally activated the SNS, particularly due to the influence of the new generation of the members of the SNS from its centres outside of Martin on the direction of political activities. The platform of the co-operation of the Rumanians, Serbs, and Slovaks was the space for a meaningful stimulus for SNS leaders to use active forms of political activity; this also expressed the preparedness of the SNS to present national interests together with the identical or very close programmes, policy and interests of other nations which were in the same position as the Slovaks. The SNS operated in coalition with the Rumanian and Serbian national parties as a representative of a separate nation. This not only strengthened the awareness of the responsibility for the matters of their nation among its members and proponents but, through these relations, the Slovak question entered the field of vision of political and public circles of Austria-Hungary. The facts about the Slovaks started to be discussed more often also in western Europe, and became particularly visible at the beginning of the 20th century. It should be noted, however, that the Slovak question was put forward as the question of a community whose historical development resulted in the constituting of its own national identity, which was under constant pressure and had to resist threats of assimilation.

The representatives of the national parties of the Rumanians, Serbs, and Slovaks released an unambiguous statement in the conclusions of the 1895 Budapest Nationality Congress that, with regard to the historically formed multinational character of the Kingdom of Hungary, the individualities of particular nations should be reflected in the state administration so as to correspond to the natural composition of the nations within the country.⁴ In the following year they strictly refused the ef-

⁴ The programme of the alliance of the Rumanian, Slovak, and Serbian national parties in Hungary (Uhorsko) and Transylvania. BOKES, F. (ed.): *Dokumenty k slovenskému národnému hnutiu v rokoch 1848–1914. III. 1885–1901*. Bratislava 1972, pp. 277–281.

forts of the Magyar political forces during the millennium celebration of the arrival of the old Magyars to the Carpathian basin to present former Hungary (Uhorsko) as a state which, from the very beginning had been, still was and would be the state of exclusively the Magyar nation. In the document The Protest of the Rumanians, Serbs, and Slovaks concerning the millennium commemoration, they officially denied the thesis identifying the Kingdom of Hungary (Uhorsko) with the Magyar nation state and declared: "...we, three nations of Hungary (Uhorsko), Rumanians, Serbs, and Slovaks, declare solemnly and resolutely that in this year of 1896, we really exist as live, individual nations and national bodies equipped with all abundant attributes, that not only for a millennium, but for much longer, they have preserved their national existence, national character, national language, habits, feelings, consciousness and have the clear insurmountable will to live so with God's help also in the future..."⁵

The activation of the SNS at the beginning of the 1890s led to public proclamation of national and political demands during people's assemblies as a new, so far not used, form of political event. Although the events could not be organized according to the intents of the SNS because of the interventions of the authorities, their goals proved that the SNS wanted to attract the attention of the wider public, to convey their demands for the recognition of the rights of the Slovak nation at people's assemblies and, at the same time, speak up for activities in solidarity with the Rumanians and the Serbs.

Of course, in the given stage of the development of the power situation in Austria-Hungary, the possibility of solving the questions in terms of the Memorandum did not appear to be real or topical. Nevertheless, even under those circumstances there was a possibility to make use of the space provided by the nationality law of 1868.⁶ The fact that the law had never been brought into effect, that it merely existed as "a dead letter", was used by the SNS as an argument for enforcing its implementation in particular political activities by particular governmental and state organs. Although according to this law, the nation could not be granted linguistic and cultural rights as a collective entity, in the event of respect for its provisions by particular bodies and institutions, some linguistic rights could have been granted to Slovak inhabitants as individuals at lower levels of administration, judiciary, schools, church, group activities, etc., which would help, at least partially, to cultivate national life.

The emphasis laid by the SNS on putting the nationality law into effect did not mean that it abandoned the strategic goal of the Memorandum; the SNS took the

⁵ Ibid., p. 304.

⁶ The preparation and adoption of the nationality law was worked out from the Slovak point of view by BOKES, F.: *Pokusy o slovensko-maďarské vyrovnanie r. 1861–1868*. Turč. Sv. Martin 1941. See also the study KARPAT, J.: *Uhorský národnostný zákon z roku 1868 a Slováci*. In: *Pocta akademiku V. Vaněčkovi k 70. narodeninám*. Univerzita Karlova, Praha 1975, pp. 169–178.

conditions of real political activities into account and tried at least to point out that the government had no interest in upholding the valid legal norms containing provisions that, according to the ruling of particular bodies, certain linguistic and cultural rights could be awarded to persons belonging to non-Magyar nationalities.

The extent of those rights, which the law could have granted, could in no case correspond to even the minimum space for the possible statement that the law would guarantee the existence of the identity of non-Magyar nations even without state and legal attributes.

It is known that at the turn of the century a significant differentiation took place in Slovak politics. This finally presented the necessity of the return of the SNS to full political activity, i.e. to participation in parliamentary election. In spite of the fact that individual currents were politically crystallized, they actually remained within the SNS. They agreed in the question of the perception of national identity, in the direction towards full emancipation of the Slovaks as a sovereign nation.

In connection with the participation of the SNS in the 1901 parliamentary election, the programme demands were updated. The SNS did not use the programme of the memorandum in its state and legal wording and in its election programme, but prioritized only the exigencies of bringing the nationality law into effect.⁷ It did not change, however, the quintessence and the sense of the activities of the SNS since in that case it concerned the real possibility of placing certain demands with respect to the possibilities of their acceptance by the ruling circles.

In the document Organization, the SNS declares in the political sphere that it “determines and completes the political Slovak-national programme and works on its implementation” and “keeps up relations with non-Magyar and all Slavic nations and cares for continuous information of foreign countries about the situation in Hungary (Uhorsko) as a whole and about the matters concerning the Slovak nation separately”.⁸

Among the political tasks of the SNS included in the document Organization of the SNS,⁹ it is stated that the SNS “keeps up relations with all political parties and nationalities of the Kingdom of Hungary...”, which within the given context anchors its nation-representative function. The primary task in this field is, however, the task according to which the SNS “directs its activities towards gaining the natural and legal rights belonging to the Slovak nation in a political and national respect”.

From the perspective of the presentation of the Slovak question it was important that in the Hungarian parliament the demands and attitudes to the solution of na-

⁷ Election programme of the SNS. *Národné noviny* 18.6.1901.

⁸ The document was of the character of the Statute of the party and was adopted in connection with the preparation of the parliamentary election in April 1901.

⁹ The document adopted in August 1901 specified the tasks from the previous document.

tionality relations were recorded thanks to Slovak deputies, who emphasized that the problem of the recognition of the rights of non-Magyar nations was still topical and pressing in spite of the efforts of the Magyar political camp: it could not be either ignored or minimalized through false arguments.

This tendency was strengthened in 1905 by the collective performance of the Slovak, Rumanian, and Serbian members of parliament in the Parliamentary Nationality Party, which made up a special parliamentary club. It was based on the ideas of coalition cooperation and solidarity in the interest of the establishment of national equality and democratic reforms in the Kingdom of Hungary. If the SNS constantly and principally supported the idea of equality, it also confirmed its strategic aim – state and legal recognition of national sovereignty of the Slovaks as a nation subject with its own identity.

It should be stressed that after the 1861 Memorandum the idea of national identity was anchored most comprehensively in the Programme of the SNS immediately before World War I.¹⁰ The context of the document shows that the programme of the SNS covered the interests of a historically formulated national society, that the SNS continued the work of the Slovak representatives and groupings which conveyed and enforced the interests of the nation, that the nation's identity was developing and applied in relations with other nations, that the consciousness of national sovereignty had always been associated with the necessity of fulfilling this sovereignty in favourable conditions, that the struggle for national rights was actually the struggle to maintain and strengthen national identity.

The programme includes in short the demands for the equality of nations as state-forming subjects of Hungary (Uhorsko) recognized by law, for autonomous administration of the internal matters of the nations which would secure particular rights, and for the introduction of democratic reforms in the region of civil rights and freedoms.

The fact that the SNS did not declare its primary mission to be defending the nation's rights merely at their existing level but it also defined its understanding of national identity, is reflected in the part entitled Nationality and patriotism. It states, among others: "Our slogan is nationality since nationality is the chief idea of the centuries-old struggles of the nations in Europe. The national question is the question of our life.." ¹¹

Historically formed national identity from which the idea of national sovereignty springs as a principle of the sense of the fight for national rights, has the crucial position in that programme document of the SNS. This confirms the task of the SNS in the political sphere of the Slovak emancipation process and the significance of its activities in the continual line of national and political struggles.

¹⁰ The Programme of the SNS. Turč. Sv. Martin 1914.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 19.

The possibility of the representation of national sovereignty in the political sphere was weakened by the absence of an organ that would officially convey nation-wide interests. An attempt at creating the Slovak National Council in 1914 was a certain completion of the nation-representative function of the SNS when, on its initiative, such an authoritative forum should have been constituted from the representatives of all political parties and currents. The National Council should have been the supreme national body directed inwards the national community and would have simultaneously represented the Slovaks as the sovereign nation with respect to other nations both within the Habsburg Monarchy and abroad.

The Slovak National Council played such a nation-representative role in the revolutionary period of 1918–1919. Its fate was determined, however, by different power-political coordinates.