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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

National Consolidation

Slovakia and the Media

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

Journalists are the canaries in the coal-mines of Central Europe's new democracies. If a government is willing to accept criticism from its press then it is likely also to be restrained by public opinion and local control as well. Leaders inclined to silence their critics in the media are not likely to pay much attention to softer voices either.

The censor's most common excuse has always been that he is protecting some collective from its enemies. Under communism, newspapers were restrained for fear that they would undermine advances that the working class was making against bourgeois elements. The state employed men with red pens to keep mythical capitalist conspiracies at bay.

Former communists attempting to keep their old jobs as the their states go capitalist use the same arguments they used under the old regime. Now, however, the refer to defending the "nation" rather than to defending the "working class." From China to Serbia, the party, in one form or another, divides both its citizens and foreigners into friends and enemies.

The smaller the collective, the more potent the argument. China, with a billion potential consumers, nuclear weapons and an entrenched bureaucracy, can brush off a harsh piece in, say *The New York Times*. No multi-national corporation is going to throw out its plans to invest in Shanghai because of fears engendered by a columnist. But one harsh attack on the government of a nation as small as Slovakia sets the highest ministerial heads spinning. One of the most amusing sights in Bratislava has always been to watch ministers tremble with rage at the questions of a diminutive (and sharp) 23-year-old correspondent of Business

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Central Europe.

If the nation, like Slovakia, has recently gone independent, the case for censorship grows stronger still. The new nation's institutions, such as its currency, are extremely vulnerable. By definition the new state has at least one neighbor it couldn't get along with; perhaps it also has others supposed to harbor territorial claims on the new state. If, finally, the citizens of the new republic are themselves unsure how a good an idea independence was, then the case for censorship is irresistable. The new institutions must be protected from the lack of faith of the people they are meant to serve.

It is therefore perhaps remarkable that, in its first year of independence, Slovakia enjoyed the range of press freedoms it did. Although the prime minister that led the country to independence, Vladimir Meciar, wrought fearful vengeance on journalists close to his most bitter enemies (see CRR-4), he allowed a range of other dailies to publish bitter attacks on him. Papers close to the former communists, for example, struck often and hard without suffering any retribution.

That may now change. The mandarians at the Ministry of Culture in Bratislava are preparing a "comprehensive media policy" that, according to the ministry's state secretary (or deputy minister) Roman Zelenay, will "clarify" the government's distribution of information, define rights to obtain information and "break. . . the stereotypical image of Slovakia abroad." Such a policy is necessary, according to Minister of Culture Dusan Slobodnik, because "false rumors" spread by a network of enemies of the current government have frightened the population and are "dangerous to the public."

When the government's "comprehensive media policy" emerges from the ministry's faceless concrete building on the Danube, human rights activists and political theorists ought to give it a close look. In the past year, Slovakia's government has moved from taking random pot-shots at "opposition" journalists to virtually equating dissent with treason. If, as seems likely, Meciar's party will govern in coalition with extreme nationalists, the canaries will begin to drop in their cages.

Some political background

Since winning a large plurality in the June 1992 elections, Meciar's time in government has been difficult. The steps taken by his political party, the "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia," (HZDS) have been popular neither abroad nor at home. Opinion polls at the time of the June 1992 elections showed that less than a quarter of Slovaks favored a break with Prague; Meciar was

nevertheless railroaded by the Czechs into accepting the split. When Meciar's government unilaterally completed the construction of a dam along the Danube river, the Hungarian government downstream protested vigorously. Arguments with the Czechs over the division of former Czechoslovak state property have embittered both sides.

In early 1993, Meciar's political movement began to crumble under the pressure. Meciar's former ally, Milan Knazko, disagreed publicly with Meciar and was removed as Foreign Minister. When he left the HZDS, he took 7 members of parliament with him, reducing Meciar's party to 66 out of 150 seats. Meciar also quarrelled with his Minister of the Economy, Ludovit Cernak, head of the Slovak National Party (SNS). The break left Meciar without a firm parliamentary majority from March 1993 on. Talks with the SNS about restoring the coalition have seemed successful several times but have always broken down at the last minute.

With his political power withering, Meciar, once apparently omnipotent, became a target of savage press criticism. He has been attacked especially ferociously from those journalists who were close to the former government coalition of liberals (ODU) and Christian Democrats (KDH) or to the former communists (who control 29 parliamentary seats) and from the politically neutral but savage tabloid press.

Meciar at first responded with arbitrary government force. While never imposing censorship across the board, he did not hesitate to use the state against specific political targets. In its first year his government was especially thorough in attacking journalists or newspapers close to the ODU and KDH. Meciar's campaign against those who, in a phrase he used often, had "refused to accept the election results" smacked of revenge. But it did not comprise an all-out effort against all his critics. Meciar has never, for example, attempted to close either *Praca* or *Pravda* ("Work" and "Truth"), two of the country's three largest newspapers and close to the former communists. But he treated state property as his personal political tool, using every ounce of leverage over television and public bodies to exclude his opponents and promote his friends.

In short, a newspaper or journalist firmly shored up by private resources could always say what it pleased. But anyone hoping for fair play from the state in its administration of press law or public property was disappointed. Meciar and members of his government behaved not so much as the guarantor of rights to free speech but as the one club of players in a combatitive political game who have state power on their side.

While Meciar lashed out randomly at his opponents on the right, however, members of his government systematically cultivated a group of pro-Meciar journalists who had extremely nationalist credentials. Through the Ministry of Culture, Meciar sympathizers have plotted a "media strategy" that promises to be more thorough in its pursuit of opposition journalists, especially those who question the wisdom of dividing the Czechoslovak state.

Two factors indicate that what had been merely a series of petulant attacks on the "opposition" will now become a more thorough assault on his party's opponents. The first is political. Meciar has wooed the Slovak National Party back to coalition talks by speaking to its deputy chairmen behind the back of the moderate leader, Cernak. A coalition of HZDS and an SNS in which Cernak were powerless would bring the country's most nationalist elements together. The recent removal of the head of Slovak television may be a sign of things to come; although no coalition had yet been formed, the SNS was happy to cooperate with the HZDS because, its leaders complained, the director had been a "closet federalist."

The second factor has to do with the characters of the leaders of the Ministry of Culture, the organ charged with shaping the media policy. As shown below, its three most prominent members -- Slobodnik, Zelenay and head of the minister's office, Alexander Stevik -- have all at one time or another equated criticism of Meciar's political movement with criticism of the Slovak nation itself. Their allies among reporters, such as the members of "The Association of Journalists for a True Picture of Slovakia," have recently taken such a nationalist line to the top of state institutions.

BROADCASTING

Slovak state television

Since its electoral victory, Meciar's political party has changed the structure and membership of the boards governing Slovak television frequently and for purely political reasons. The party's actions have caused chaos and dismay at the stations and among private investors.

Before the 1992 elections, Slovak television was governed by a council that included representatives of all political parties, regardless of their representation in parliament. Shortly after he was elected, Meciar changed this structure. The television council was now to be directly appointed by a parliamentary majority. A Slovak law professor, Jan Prusak, complained that there was no way to guarantee that a parliamentary majority, whatever its promises, would preserve the council's independence. And indeed the parliament hasn't. Although

regularly stuffed with supporters of Meciar's HZDS and SNS, the council has been changed at least twice, most recently as the two parties began to settle their differences and move back into coalition.

In an interview held in August 1993, Slobodnik, the Minister of Culture, vigorously denied that the government played any role in determining the political character of television news. Slovak television received part of its budget directly from the state, he said, but as public corporations were not under the direct control of any ministry. The nine-member council overseeing radio and television was independent, he said. "There are no members of any political party." In fact, Slobodnik said, the content of Slovak television broadcasting demonstrated its freedom. Slovak television was "absolutely anti-government," he said. "It is absolutely in the hands of the opposition."

"The people in Slovakia write and write and complain that television is anti-government," Slobodnik said, "because TV supports the defeated members of the party that didn't get more than four percent of the vote (ODU -- CR) Many people write that they will refuse to pay their TV fees."

In August, Slobodnik denied having any interest in the governance of television, since it was not his responsibility as minister of culture to oversee it. But, according to *The New York Times*, Slobodnik called in September 1993 for the abolition of the public corporation governing television so that the broadcasters could answer directly to the Ministry of Culture. Television, the *Times* quoted Slobodnik as saying, gives "too much space to the opposition."

The Slovak government has not taken any such step yet. In October 1993, however, Meciar's political party cooperated in parliament with its would-be coalition partner, the Slovak National Party (SNS), once again to change the board governing television and radio. The new council has five HZDS sympathizers, observers say, and two SNS allies. The new council dismissed the director of Slovak television, whom the SNS had accused of not taking a nationalist enough line.

Despite the turmoil in its governance, state television offered access to opposition politicians, such as Christian Democrat Jan Carnogursky, at least as late as October 1993. The opposition worries, however, that Meciar, through government-edited programs such as "Ten Minutes for the Premier" and "The Government Informs," has far too much airtime. They also complain that journalists at Slovak television are frightened to confront ministers with serious questions. Slovak TV has replaced its former current affairs interview program, "What the Week Brought," with a softer version, called "Steps," during which

officials are asked no tough questions. And the character of television may change dramatically now, given that the parliament's new coalition is likely to be extremely nationalist.

News on state and private radio

Only two Slovak radio stations have strong news staffs -- one of the state's two AM broadcasters and Radio Free Europe. The other stations, such as "Radio Twist," "Rock FM" and "Fun Radio," use news from the Slovak Press Agency. (Its character is described below.)

At first, Meciar did not complain about Slovak radio. Indeed, many their former employees were rewarded for boosting Meciar's candidacy with positions in his government. Despite its important role in supporting Meciar during the 1992 election campaign, Slovak state radio had not toed the government line thereafter. The editor of the crucial daily news magazine "Radiozurnal," Maria Hluchova, was seen as a friend of the opposition. The director of news at Slovak Radio, Lubomir Lintner, was considered relatively independent.

During the summer of 1993, the Slovak government cut funding for state radio and pressured its director, Vladimir Stefko, to fire Lintner.

Slovak state radio receives 60 percent of its funding from concession fees paid by radio owners. Sixteen percent of its budget -- 40 million crowns (approx. 1.3 million USD) -- comes directly from the Ministry of Finance. In June 1993, Stefko discovered that the station's direct subsidy, although part of the approved 1993 budget, had not been provided. In a private meeting (the contents of which were later relayed to Lintner and then the Slovak press) the Minister of Finance, Julius Toth, told Stefko that radio had a political, not financial problem.

In light of the smaller budget, Lintner reallocated his resources. He cut cultural programs traditionally broadcast on AM radio but kept "Radiozurnal" well-funded.

Meanwhile, party political pressure on radio grew. In July, Meciar accused "Radiozurnal" of being "anti-government" and of having supported a failed second attempt to remove him as prime minister. In September, Meciar again accused Radiozurnal of being "anti-government" at a public rally for the HZDS.

On October 8, Stefko fired Lintner. Hluchova and three other radio journalists resigned in protest.

The changes at Slovak radio leave "Radio Free Europe" as the only independent

source of radio news. Many of the government's opponents have gravitated there. Slobodnik recently warned the new American Embassy in Bratislava that his government would "monitor" RFE's broadcasts and would complain about any hostile reporting. A recent test of phone lines at the station's editorial offices in Bratislava demonstrated that they are bugged.

PRESSURE ON THE PRESS

Slovakia has a wide range of daily and weekly newspapers that operate with great freedom within some constraints, such as limited access to press conferences and goverment ministers. Dailies such as *Pravda, Praca* and *Trend*, a business weekly, attack the government ferociously and without suffering retribution. But when the Slovak government picks its targets, as it often did after the 1992 elections, it hits hard. More worryingly, it now uses a party-political network that manipulates state property to put forward a pro-government line.

Distribution: PNS

The Slovak state newspaper distributor, PNS, has been a common target of complaints among newspaper editors. The editors of the most ferociously oppositional newspapers, *Slovensky Vychod, Kulturny Zivot* and *Domino* complain that PNS will not carry their papers.

It is difficult to judge the validity of such claims, since PNS, like many state companies, is simply poorly-run. New newspapers, such as *Domino*, face obstruction from the point-of-purchase salesmen, who are often unwilling to change their accounting procedures to accommodate a new paper. Papers are sent back unsold because the on-site distributor cannot be bothered to (and, as a state employee, has no incentive to) attempt to sell a new title. PNS now faces competition in the larger cities from new companies such as the Austrian-owned Mediaprint (over 300 stands) and smaller networks. With an outlet in every Slovak village, however, PNS remains the main source of newspapers.

At least one government minister has said he would like to control what gets sold through PNS. The government's aim would be to restrict the sale of Czech newspapers, many of whom are openly hostile to the Meciar government and employ some of its fiercest critics (the best example being Karol Wolf of *Mlada Fronta Dnes*, whom Slovak ministers mention by name when complaining about the press.) In an interview with the Slovak Press Agency, state secretary at the Ministry of Culture Roman Zelenay complained that "there are too many Czech periodicals in Slovakia and we will have to do something about it." At an Oct. 13 press conference, Zelenay, refering to PNS, said that "we will discontinue (receiving) foreign periodicals that do not sell well."

Government intimidation of the press

The ministers of the new Slovak government have always had a penchant for exacting revenge on individual journalists and newspapers. When the regional daily *Smer* accused Meciar and his then-ally Knazko of using secret police channels shortly after the revolution, both sued. When they lost in the local court, Meciar appealed and asked that the trial be moved to Bratislava.

At least one other journalist investigating Meciar's past has been intimidated. On the evening of Nov. 26, two members of the Slovak Ministry of the Interior visited Czech journalist Jarmila Kudlackova at her home in the Czech Lands. The Slovak Ministry of the Interior said the two had planned to discuss an interview Mrs. Kudlackova had held with Leonard Cimo, a former Slovak secret police offier with close ties to Meciar. The Czech Ministry of the Interior filed a protest with its Slovak counterpart, arguing that the visit was an attempt to intimidate Mrs. Kudlackova.

Meciar was always prone to random attacks on the "opposition." When Slovakia went independent, however, he set a new tone -- that a criticism of his actions was an attack on Slovakia itself.

When on Jan. 3, 1993, the Slovak government replaced the controversial staff of the state-owned youth daily, *Smena* ("Change" or "Shift"), Meciar was subjected to a round of criticism abroad. It had happened, after all, just two days after the independent Slovak state had been founded.

Julius Gembicky, chairman of the Slovak Association of Journalists, worried that the government's moves against *Smena* "would not send a good signal abroad, since the implication is that there is no freedom of the press in Slovakia." Meciar, however, saw fault not in his government's action but in criticism of it. "The *Smena* case is being stirred up by people unwilling to accept the last election results and were against the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic," he said in his weekly television broadcast. "They used the case to advertise the new newspaper they want to publish. They did this at the expense of disgracing the honor of Slovakia's name abroad."

PRO-ACTIVE PRESS POLICIES

Since then, Meciar's government has moved from merely striking out occasionally at the opposition to cultivating a stable of extreme nationalist journalists for its own institutions. These journalists are receiving government aid in putting across a ferociously pro-Slovak, anti-Hungarian line that may heat a troubled region's tempers beyond the boiling point.

The core of this inner-circle of journalists is the "Association of Journalists for a True Picture of Slovakia." Members get invitations to exclusive press conferences. Its founder, Dusan Kleinman, is now the head of the Slovak Press Agency (TASR), which, in addition to providing bulletins used by virtually every radio station in Slovakia, also acts as the government's official means of disseminating information.

Another source of pro-government journalists has been the alumni of *Koridor*, a now-defunct daily. Under the editorship of Jergus Ferko, *Koridor* had promoted a fiercely nationalist line even before the division of Czechoslovakia. Before the paper's demise, the newly-founded Slovak Press Agency had been in negotiations to take it over as a government daily. Instead, TASR established a new government daily, *Republika* , under the editorship of a former *Koridor* journalist, Jan Smolec.

Smolec had praised the virtues of taking a strong nationalist line in *Koridor* the year before he took up his new post. "Dear colleagues," he wrote, "Slovakia, our homeland, is now passing through times of historic decisions. We, the journalists of this generation, have to decide whether we are going together with the nation and will strengthen its will, its spirit, its right to its own existence, to give it the strength which will help it to overcome the lies, misinformation which our enemies spread around, not only in the world, but also in this country."

Although Smolec now distances himself from *Koridor*, which he dismisses as having been "nationalist in a Balkan way," he admits that he hopes to run a nationalist newspaper. "We understand that after the division of Czechoslovakia," he said in an interview, "there are a lot of people who support the federation, which is quite normal. We respect the founding of the Slovak state and support the government that did it." Later, he said that the paper "has a sort of censorship, in that it is impossible to be against Slovak independence."

Republika is funded by TASR and, according to former TASR employees, frequently receives news of important government decisions ahead of other TASR subscribers. Some of *Republika* 's equipment, the same employees report, had been bought by the government for TASR.

The newspaper appears to receive a form of direct government funding, although Slobodnik, Kleinman and Smolec all deny it. The newspaper is officially a "commercial venture" TASR, which is allowed such entreprenurial activities by law. TASR had obtained a bank loan to launch *Republika* , Kleinman said, and would expect a return as soon as the paper became profitable. The paper did not get "one crown" of state money, Kleinman said, and would not. "We will be strict

about this."

If a commercial venture, *Republika* is a risky one. The only start-up newspaper to have made a profit in 1992 is the tabloid *Novy Cas* (New Time), Slovakia's first daily tabloid. TASR itself lost 5.2 million crowns ($179,000) in 1991 and 15.9 million crowns ($548,000) in 1992, according to the Slovak business daily *Trend* (which, incidentally, complained that Kleinman refused to answer questions about TASR finances, despite a law requiring him to do so.)

"Our situation with *Republika* is economically and politically difficult," Kleinman said in an interview, "but Slovakia needs such a daily." Kleinman admitted that the paper took a pro-government line but said that in a "new democracy" such as Slovakia, "some things function differently than in other democratic states. . . We live in a time when everybody can spread myths and you can see it in the newspapers . We intend to write true information."

Kleinman's frankness about the government's aims in establishing *Republika* were echoed by Slobodnik. Slobodnik said the paper was indirectly supported by the government but only as a means of countering newspapers supported by other political players "If you read Slovak," he said, "you will find that every daily is propaganda. There is no daily newspaper in Slovakia which would not be (considered) propaganda."

The economics of newspapers meant that any paper selling less than 130,000 copies requires some outside funding, Slobodnik said. In particular that he thought the Banska Bystrica daily *Smer* and the Kosice-based *Slovensky Vychod* were receiving support. "Perhaps we will learn, we will try to learn, who is supporting them," he said.

Republika is not merely an unquestioning supporter of government policy. It is also ferociously anti-Hungarian. Almost every issue contains an editorial cartoon depicting the Hungarians as scheming to retake control of Slovakia. (Until the founding of the Czechslovak state in 1918, Hungary governed Slovakia as part of its share of the Austro-Hungarian empire.) A typical issue, for example, carried a cartoon with four shepherds standing on hills marked "Slovakia," "Rumania," "Ukraine" and "Serbia" -- all countries with large Hungarian minorities. "Hey," the Slovak shepherd was shown calling out to his colleagues. "We all seemed to be threatened by the same wolf."

Smolec denied that such cartoons were inflaming nationalist hatred. "We will support our own nation," he said, "but we don't want to attack other nations. There are a lot of tensions in our relationship with Hungary. We think these

cartoons make the heavy politics lighter."

Republika's nationalist tone is especially frightening given one of its recent "entreprenurial" successes. In August 1993, the newspaper signed a deal whereby it would publish articles for the Slovak army in exchange for an army requirement that Slovakia's 30,000 soldiers buy the newspaper. An article in the September 13, 1993 issue described in great detail how the Hungarian army would launch an attack on Slovakia.

Smolec also said the paper would take a different approach from other papers on questions such as state conflicts with the Romany community. Most papers had, for example, roundly criticized the mayor of an eastern Slovak village who had announced curfews for Romanies. *Republika*, on the other hand, would seek also to "describe the crimes of the gypsies and what the motivation of the mayor was."

The same attitude of nationalist paranoia pervades other state-funded publications. *Literarny Tyzdennik*, for example, frequently publishes articles like "Dystopicky Paprikas" ("Dyspeptic Paprikas," -- paprika being a common element in Hungarian cuisine), the cover story of its issue number 39. The article compares Jozef Antall, the prime minister of Hungary, to Adolf Hitler, the latter having pursued "Greater Germany" as the former is now creating "Greater Hungary."

Alumni of *Koridor* and members of the "Association of Journalists for a True Picture of Slovakia" turn up more and more frequently in state agencies associated with the media (see, for example, the presence of former *Koridor* editor Emile Boldisova on the Slovak board of television.) If Smolec is, as rumored he will be, promoted to the head of Slovak television, it will merely be the latest advancement up a ladder provided for nationalist and government-friendly journalists.

The character of the Ministry of Culture and its minister

Whatever propaganda instruments the government is supporting, the heart of its campaign will be the "comprehensive media policy" it is preparing. It's therefore worth taking a look at the character of the ministry's leaders.

I asked Slobodnik, the minister of culture, to justify an article in an issue of the quasi-official state magazine *Europa Vincet*, which is published in English, French and German, called on Slovaks living abroad to submit newspaper clippings in which citizens of Slovakia criticized the government. "The authors of these cynical lies often are citizens of the CSFR," the editorial board wrote. "Through the constitution of a sovereign and independent Slovak Republic conditions have ensued for the propagators of this anti-Slovak political racism to

be brought to justice and legal liability in terms of Czecho-Slovak laws now in vigor." Slobodnik was both minister and a member of *Europa Vincet's* editorial board at the time the article was published.

When presented with the above quotation, Slobodnik defended the policy it represents. "Many authors abroad," he said, use "a system. Somebody here who dislikes this state says there will be hunger here, a social uprising. He sends it to a German paper, they print it, they repeat it, and it's a false rumor." Such false rumors are a threat to the state that the government must counter, Slobodnik said, since they are "dangerous to the public." Slobodnik also said that many such "rumors" printed in dailies abroad, such as that Slovakia is an inherently anti-Semitic country or that there will likely soon be a food shortage in the country, had turned out to be untrue. The rumors had nonetheless had the effect of frightening Slovak citizens and defaming Slovakia's name abroad

Slobodnik not only has trouble distinguishing between attacks on his government and attacks on Slovakia. As a recent court case demonstrated, he appears to consider himself an embodiment of the nation.

Over the summer and autumn of 1993, Slobodnik sued Slovak poet Lubomir Feldek for defamation of character Slobodnik argued that Feldek had in three instances falsely accused him of having been a willing collaborator of the Hlinka Youth, a fascist organization established during the 1939-1945 independent Slovak state

In one instance, Feldek told newspapers such as the Slovak daily *Praca* (among others) that Slobodnik's "fascist past" made him an inappropriate Minister of Culture. *Praca* published the quotation in its July 24, 1992 issue. Secondly, Slobodnik argued that a poem Feldek had published in the cultural weekly *Kulturny Zivot* had alleged again that Slobodnik had been an eager fascist. Although the poem does not mention Slobodnik by name, it describes the Meciar government as being one in which "Esesak sa objal s estebakom," or "an StBnik kissed an SSnik." (StB is the Slovak abbreviation for the communist secret police. Ever since abolishing a law restricting the participation of former secret police agents in government, Meciar's party has suffered accusations that it is full of former agents and collaborators.)

Finally, Slobodnik accused Feldek of having been behind a conspiracy to blacken his name abroad, specifically in *The New York Times*, which published an opinion piece shortly after Slobodnik had been appointed by the Czech-Canadian writer Josef Skvorecky. In his column, Skvorecky claimed that Slobodnik had been both a Nazi and KGB collaborator. In the course of the trial Slobodnik

dropped this third claim.

The trial was a civil, not criminal, case. But for several irregularities it might have been a standard case of a minister attempting personally to clear his name. As a civil case, it boiled down to whether Feldek had evidence for his charge. Feldek said that he had read of Slobodnik's "fascist past" in Slobodnik's auto-biography, *Beyond the Artic Circle* Slobodnik argued in turn that the book specifically states that, as a 17-year-old, he had joined the Hlinka Youth under duress and had merely attended a camp for five days. The charges that he had been an active agent of the organization were made by Soviet authorities following the invading army and had later been disavowed by Slovak authorities, Slobodnik argued.

Feldek's lawyer, Ernest Valko, made the point that was to carry the case in Feldek's favor. Valko asked the court to take into account American precedent, such as the 1964 *Sullivan vs. the New York Times* case, that allowed "public persons" such as government officials less protection against defamatory remarks than those accorded to private individuals. Such a lower level of protection would allow Feldek to interpret Slobodnik's own words with greater freedom than he might be able to if the words had been written by a private individual. On October 18, the Bratislava City Court dismissed Slobodnik's case

Despite the outcome in favor of Feldek, the trial was beset by oddities that call into question how the Slovak government works when one of its members is attacked by the press.

The case was, as I mentioned a civil, not criminal, case. Slobodnik appeared in court as an individual attempting to clear his name. "Good for him," was my first thought. Slovak journalists work to appallingly low standards and often print attacks on individuals without proof. (I write as one accused by the Slovak nationalist press of being a "Jewish agent sent from America to destroy Slovakia." Would they be happier if they knew I came from Czech Protestant stock? Maybe not.)

Despite the private nature of the case, Slobodnik regularly insisted that both he and Slovakia had been defamed, particularly in the third instance. "The statement of the defendent," he told the court, "in fact untrue, has become the basis for attacks on me, Slovaks and Slovakia." At one point during the proceedings, Slobodnik offered to drop this third point in exchange for 250,000 Slovak crowns, to be donated to humanitarian causes and a special fund established by a nationalist group to provide reserves to support the new Slovak currency. In other words, Slobodnik was willing to drop his claim that the nation had been

offended in exchange for support of the nation's currency.

To her credit the judge hearing the case dismissed such arguments. "Mr. Slobodnik," she said at one point, "You are here as Mr. Slobodnik."

"Mr. Slobodnik argued that he was Slovakia and that Slovakia had been denigrated in the world," Ernest Valko, the lawyer who represented Feldek, said after the trial. "It's the same as under Communism, where, if you attacked a Communist, you attacked the whole party."

Valko praised the judge's bravery. Valko himself was in no position to intimidate the judge. As a member of the former federation's constitutional court, Valko had upheld a federal law banning the employment of former secret police collaborators in government. One of the first steps Meciar's government took upon declaring sovereignty was to overturn that law. If anything, Valko is considered as much of an enemy of the new Slovakia as Feldek.

Indeed, the case represented not merely a confluence of arguments in favor of defending both the Communist Party and the nation but of people who defended the former and were now defending the latter. Unlike Valko, Slobodnik's lawyer could have easily (and, I have heard, indeed did) try to frighten her. He was the "chief-of-staff" of the Slovakia's last Communist premier and is today vice-chairman of the Slovak Bar Association

And Slobodnik's supporters did not hesitate to use old Communist methods. In July 1993, Feldek received anonymous phone calls allegeding that Darius Rusnak, director of the Slovak state archives, had taken the former regime's files on both Feldek and his father and given them to Slobodnik's supporters. The caller said that the files would be used to demonstrate that, whatever the charges against Slobodnik, Feldek's father had collaborated with the Nazis when he served as a judge in the town of Senica during the war-time state.

There is no evidence linking Slobodnik directly to the anonymous phone calls. When asked about the documents in an interview, Slobodnik admitted that he had copies of the files. They had been sent to him, he said, by an anonymous supporter. "I have the documents. I don't deny it," he said. "The question is whether I use them or not. I was sent them from my supporters and I don't see anything unusual." Slobodnik said he had decided not to use the files.

The fact that it is illegal to obtain, much less use in court, the former secret police files of another Slovak citizen did not seem to perturb Slobodnik. Why should it? As Meciar said in his New Year's address to the newly-independent republic, it

was time to "draw a think line" between the nation's Communist past and the challenges ahead as an independent state. Over at the Ministry of Culture, Alexander Stevik, head of the ministry's secretariat, has called the nation's supporters to rally. In the January 1993 issue of *Europa Vincet*, Stevik wrote that:

> At the moment, it is of importance that information and socio-scientific sources *be under the control* (my italics) of that section of our intelligentsia which is not nationally indifferent, does not adapt itself to the direction of the winds and does not exploit the nation for promoting its own career.
>
> Today, in particular, our intelligentsia must take up the lifestyle of its predecessors who lived at the time of Anton Bernolak and Ludovit Stur [19th century Slovak nationalists]. Like them, we must devote ourselves wholly and without compromise to the service of the nation, must throw in our whole weight into the fight for our common mother, for this Europe, for our European civilization, our European culture. The intelligentsia is here in order to lead the nation, to give it a well-thought out political program, to show Europe and the whole world that the Slovak nation is capable of coping with every inner-political situation and foreign-political orientation.

National consolidation

Meciar's assault on the free press has damaged Slovakia's reputation abroad, as Milan Knazko discovered when he served as the Slovak foreign minister. Knazko quarrelled with the Slovak government over its moves, arguing that they were making his job of presenting Slovakia in a decent light more difficult. Meciar fired Knazko in February 1993.

On March 28, Knazko left the "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia." In his final speech to the party he had helped to found, Knazko said that under Meciar's leadership, the movement had betrayed its own democratic ideals. The result for Slovakia, he said, had been catastrophic. "If someone had wanted to order a script of steps that would mobilize critics of the movement and give Slovakia a bad image abroad," Knazko said, "he couldn't have written anything better than what Mr. Meciar has done against the mass media."

Actually, he could -- and the Ministry of Culture is hard at work doing just that. While Meciar undoubtedly attacked the press, he took mere pot-shots compared to what his underlings are up to. They are busy cultivating institutions and journalists dedicating to fighting a ferociously nationalist propaganda campaign. This campaign, although long in the making, is only now beginning to show its fruits.

To be fair to the Slovak government, it finds itself in a frustrating situation. Since independence, Slovakia has been something of a punching bag for the foreign press. As a writer who lived in Slovakia for three years, I was often offended by portraits of the nation that implied it was more anti-Semitic than its neighbors. It simply is not (no credit to its neighbors). The Slovak government also feels threatened by the provocative statements of Hungarian prime minister Josef Antall. But other governments in the region manage to work without resorting to the vengeful use of state power that Meciar meted out in his first year in office. Nor have they, to my knowledge, entrusted the formulation of a state "media policy" to a group of nationalists so obviously incapable of distinguishing between attacks on their party and attacks on the nation. Perhaps this group will surprise observers and produce a policy that genuinely guarantees press freedoms. Human rights activists -- in fact, anyone doing government or private business in Slovakia -- ought to examine the text and its implementation very carefully. And political scientists ought to observe how a haphazard defense of independent Slovakia's first leader congealed into a protection of leader, party and nation.

Yours,

ROMAN ZELENAY, R.I.P.

Days after this report was completed Roman Zelenay, state secretary at the Slovak Ministry of Culture, died when his government car collided with a Hungarian truck waiting on the new Czech-Slovak border. He was 41.

As the above report shows, Zelenay was no friend of the free press. Journalists will miss, however, the strident tone with which he so frequently accused the Czech and Hungarian governments of sabotaging Slovakia. No other HZDS politician so clearly articulated the sense of grievance and self- pity on which his party's electoral success was built.

Western observers ought to do him the honor of checking whether his media policies are implemented by his survivors in government. If so, his contribution ought not to go unrecorded.

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