INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

"WHITHER PANNONIA?"

By Chandler Rosenberger

Dear Peter,

It has taken two world wars and tight-rope walk above a nuclear holocaust, but the Habsburg Empire is finally dead. The Slovaks, Slovenes, and the Croats, the major nationalities of the Empire's Hungarian half, have "freed" themselves from the multi-national federations that suceeded rule from Vienna. But the fall of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia ought also finally to expose the hidden agendas of those seeking national "self-determination." A trip through Pannonia, the fertile elbow of the Danube where Slovaks and Hungarians farm, shows that the politicians in Budapest and Bratislava are shouting not to be heard there, but in the further-flung corners of their own nation-states. In Pannonia, life, for the moment, goes on.

The irony of the 1992 Slovak elections is that the victors among the republic's Slovak and Hungarian populations, now at odds, shared the same lack of faith in the Czechoslovak federation. Mečiar, leader of the "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia," spoke about "Pragocentrism." Miklos Duray, leader of the Hungarian party Együttélés, ("Co-Existence") condemned a federation between two Slav nationalities, Czechs and Slovaks, as misbegotten since 1918.

The Együttélés leadership complains that the Slovak goverment is pursuing two policies that endanger the Hungarian population in Southern Slovakia. First, the government is building a large hydro-electric dam across the Danube that Együttélés claims has wrecked the environment and livelihood of the locals. Second, the government is threatening to curb education in and use of the Hungarian language.

Whether the dam or the language issues are genuine concerns no longer matters. The 1992 Czechoslovak elections not only destroyed the federation but also brought to power Hungarian-Slovak representatives of quite a new color. The "Independent Hungarian Initiative," winners among Hungarians in 1990, believed in the federation as the guarantee of civic

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rights. The " Együttélés," Movement, on the other hand, campaigned as the only Hungarian party strong enough to stand up to Slovak nationalists. They won the 1992 elections so decisively as to drive the federalists from power.

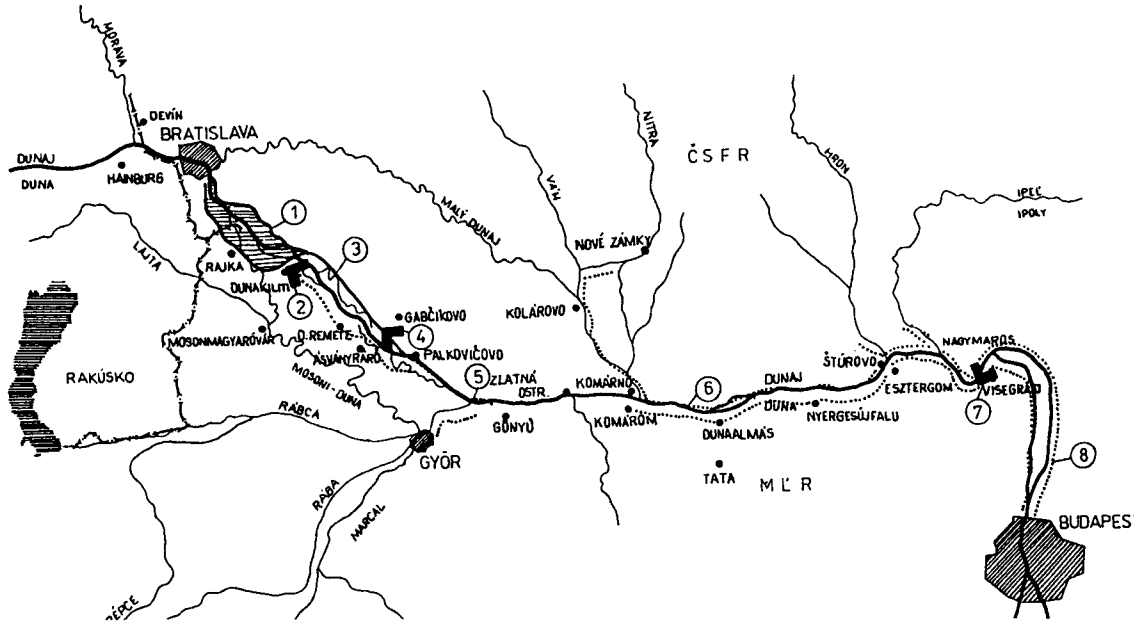
With the federation gone and advocates of "civic" rather than national rights vanquished among Hungarian leaders, the border between Slovakia and Hungary is truly in question. The dam runs through a region that is 80 percent Hungarian; the Hungarian minority, 600,000 of the 5 million Slovak citizens, has elected a party that has abandoned its work in the Slovak parliament in favor of building up muncipal networks and business ties to Budapest. The Hungarian Democratic Forum, that republic's governing party, is drifting further into nationalism as Prime Minister Joszef Antall's ill health furthers the rise of the party's vice-president, Istvan Csurka. Antall had claimed to be a Prime minister of 15 million Hungarians, only 10 million of which actually live in the Hungarian republic. Csurka, even more extreme, openly calls for a redrawing of the national borders established in 1920 at Trianon.

It is therefore important not only to judge the dam and threats to minority rights but also to see how the Együttélés movement uses any evidence of environmental damage and persecution in its case that the Slovak government is abusing the Hungarian minority intolerably. It's worth checking if Együttélés' complaints are those of ordinary Hungarian-Slovaks in Pannonia. It's also worth asking if Slovak "self-determination" benefits anyone but a "liberated" political class and if the break-up of Czechoslovakia is merely the first turn downwards into a whirlpool of smaller and smaller minorities all along the Danube.

THE "DAMNED DAM"

Some historical points

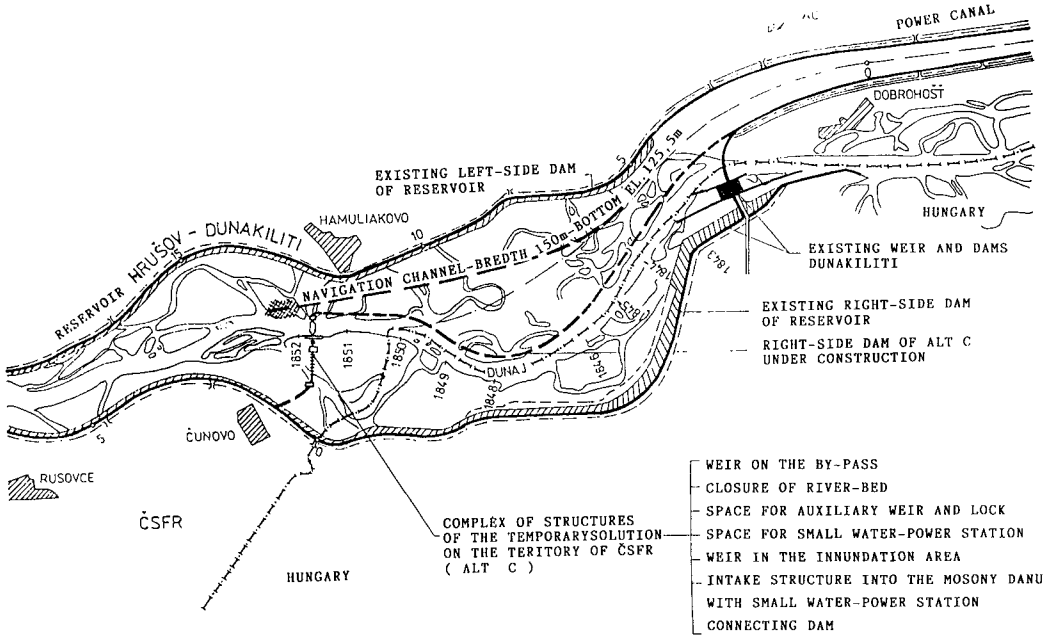
In 1977, the Communist governments of Czechoslovakia and Hungary signed an international treaty to build a canal and power station on the Danube River. The project was to have dammed the Danube just after it crossed out of Czechoslovak territory, then sent the better half of the river further north, through a by-pass canal through Slovakia. The canal would end at a power station in Gabčikovo. From there, the river would return to its bed and flow to a power station in the Hungarian town of Nagymaros.



(Gabčikovo dam as envisaged in 1977.)

The project, however, has been dogged by financial problems and complaints from environmental groups since its inception. As early as 1981, the Hungarian government, complaining of the project's cost, suspended construction, only to continue in 1985 once Austrian backing for their half of the project had been guaranteed. Hungarian environmentalists formed the Duna Kor ("Danube Circle") in 1984 to organize protests that quickly became a forum for general discontent with the Communist regime. Slovak environmentalists, although less vociferious, also became a focal point for anti-Communist work.

In 1989, the gradual decline of the Hungarian Communist Party and the sudden overthrow of the Czechslovak regime threw the entire project into doubt. In May 1989, the Hungarian government first announced a moratorium on its construction of its half. In August, the Czechoslovak government demanded $2 billion in compensation for the delay and designed the "C-option," whereby the Danube could be diverted further upstream, where both banks of the river lay on Czechoslovak soil. But Jiří Dienstbier, appointed Czechoslovak Foreign Minister after the "Velvet Revolution," quickly condemned the "gigantomanic" projects of the previous regime and promised not to take any "irrevocable" steps until after new elections.



(Alternative "C, enacted by the Slovak government in '92)

A change of mood on the Slovak side

Under Vladimír Mečiar, then Slovak Prime Minister, the Slovak government assumed full responsibility for the technical work on the dam. In April 1991, Mečiar rejected an offer from the Hungarians to rewrite the 1977 treaty and stop construction; Czechoslovakia, Mečiar argued, had already invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the project. Slovakia, furthermore, expected to receive 10 percent of its power needs from the dam. In July, Ján Čarnogurský, the new Slovak prime minister, announced the government's decision to begin construction of the "C-option" but promised to take into account the opinion of a commission of external experts.

No longer a technical issue

In June 1992, the Hungarian parliament voted to annul the 1977 treaty; in August, Hungarian Prime Minister Antall said that his government will consider any diversion of the Danube to be a violation of an international border. After talks organized by the European Community broke down in October, the Slovak government, once again led by Mečiar, enacted the "C-option" and began damming the Danube at Čunovo, one mile north of the point at which the Danube forms the Slovak-Hungarian border. The Mečiar government argued that this was the last opportunity to dam the river before heavy snowfall and the spring thaw swept into the river. To wait

another year, it argued, would be financially disastrous. Hungary reacted by requesting the intervention of Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, appealing to the International Court of Justice and writing to world leaders.

The view from the Együttélés office

You cannot see the Danube from the Együttélés offices in Bratislava, but it is on everyone's mind. Együttélés depends on two electoral districts between Bratislava and Budapest for its seats in the Slovak parliament. Because the other opposition party, the Christian Democrats, support construction of the dam, Együttélés is the last voice of dissent.

It is a rather shrill voice. Pamphlets in the office condemn the "Ill-conceived Communist-Era Monstrosity," a "monster that will drink the Danube." The Slovak government, "headed by the ultra-nationalist Premier Mečiar," threatens Budapest with "massive flooding" should the dam break. Diverting the river to engage the dam "violates the territorial integrity of Hungary."

Együttélés spokesman Laszlo Molnar speaks with more restraint but with as much concern. Building the "C-option," he said, has added to the environmental damage already done by the Communists; a further 5,000 acres of land were cleared north of the new dam at Čunovo. The diversion has left dry those Hungarian-Slovak villages whose wells drew from areas south of the new reservoir and threatens the quality of water further south, since the river will no longer run through a gravel bed that cleaned it.

Furthermore, the diversion has put at risk the livelihoods of villagers now cut off by the new canal and has jeopardized relations with Hungary unnecessarily. It's now difficult to commute to Bratislava, Molnar said, and impossible to fish. Lives themselves are at stake; the Mečiar government has not drawn up evacuation plans for the villages south of the dam. Nor has it discussed the dam and its consequences with the locals or the Hungarian government, something former Prime Minister Čarnogurský had done.

And from the Christian Democrats headquarters

Over at the headquarters of Čarnogurský's Christian Democrats, the view is roughly the same, the opinion quite different. There articles by Julius Binder, head of the company building the dam, put the technical case in favor. Most of the environmental damage has already been done, he writes; will we now offer it up as a pointless sacrifice? There is so much to gain from finishing the job.

Binder, in an article I commissioned for The East European Reporter, points out that the dam was originally designed to meet the needs of both Slovaks and Hungarians along the river's banks. In 1965, flooding wiped out 100,000 hectares of Slovak land; a similar disaster struck the Hungarian bank in 1954.

The dam is needed to open Bratislava to year-round shipping, Binder writes. The Danube south of Bratislava is at its shallowest and least stable -- only 2.0 meters deep, with banks that raise just 9 centimeters over a meter. Water quality on both sides of the border ought to improve, not decline; on the Slovak side, the reservoir will improve ground-water in the region, while a second diversion canal into the feeble Mosoni Danube will bring more water to Hunagarian cities such as Győr. The new reservoir ought to improve the local economy by offering water-sports to tourists. And there's no reason to fear either that the diversion is irrevocable or threatening; should there be any problems with the canal, the Slovak government could easily divert some or all of the Danube back into its old river-bed.

And Čarnogurský himself says that, while Mečiar's government has been less diplomatic than his, the Hungarian government has lost interest in the ecological arguments against the dam. The issue has become one of "prestige and mutual suspicion," especially for the Antall government, since it came to power on opposition to the dam.

The Hungarian government has ignored the environmental argument and brought up the border issue. In December 1992 the Slovak parliament invited the Hungarian government to participate in a review of information from monitoring devices built into the dam. The Hungarian government refused to come. Instead, it sought to bring the case to the International Court of Justice in the Hague, arguing now that the diversion of the Danube

amounted to border change. "They want to keep open the border issue," Čarnogursky said.

Such a move, however, requires the compliance of both parties. According to Roman Bužek, a spokesman of the Slovak Foreign Ministry, the Slovak government has insisted that a court review also take into account the Hungarian's unilateral breach of the 1977 treaty to build the dam, which says (article 26, 2c) that each government will "compensate the other Contracting Party or a third party for damage resulting from the late or improper performance of work and deliveries carried out by them . . . " The Hungarian government has not yet agreed to a broader consideration of the case.

And in Pannonia itself

With the views of Bratislava politicians in mind, we set off down into Pannonia. Our "delegatia," (Oxford historians Dr. Mark Almond and Prof. Norman Stone, Oxford lawyer Christine Stone, Prague Post reporter Amy Auster and Kálmán Petocz, a Hungarian-Slovak from the Hungarian Civic Party) first pulled our two Skodas over in Čunovo, the site of the new reservoir built under the "C-option."

The Gabčikovo project is, once you look at it, the sort of phenomenon that either inspires wonder or hatred, based not so much on rational arguments as instincts inculcated in childhood. When I first looked out over the vast artificial lake, I didn't so much see the scarred mudfields on either side as the thin grey line of concrete, the diversion point on the far bank, that had created from nothing a shimmering horizon, a small sea. I remembered skipping along the (artificial) rock jetties that protected the harbor near our summer house, a harbor that had launched the fastest American ships to sail around the Terra del Fuego to the Californian coast. Maybe I even thought of my own efforts then to dam the pools between the sandbars against the pull of the ebbing tide.

There are two kinds of fatalism with respect to man's relationship to nature. One, call it "Asiatic," accepts that "nature" will always have the upper hand, will always overcome a "man-made" project with legions of lichens and tides, no matter how hard a child tries to colonize the hermit crabs in a pool of his or her own making. The other, more common in Central Europe, is fatalism towards government projects, be they poisonous

thermonuclear power plants or large dams.

Andraš Toth, an editor at the largest Hungarian paper in Slovakia, lives next to the diversion point at Čunovo. His village, by and large, supports the dam. "A rural population is very realistic," he said. "If they got used to Soviet tanks in 1968, they can get used to this. They are not revolutionarily-minded."

Interviews with local farmers confirmed that water levels had risen, not fallen, since the creation of the artificial lake. "We've never had so much water in the well," said one farmer. He regretted the environmental damage done, but said most of it had been done by the Communists, not the current government. Hadn't the diversion wrecked the local fishing industry? The farmer laughed. "What fishing industry? No one has fished on this part of the river since the end of the war."

The farmer feared rising political conflict, not rising tides, and worried that neither the Hungarian nor Slovak government was capable of representing his case. "Are you more worried about the political use of the dam than the dam itself?" I asked him. Prof. Stone translated: "Yes, definitely yes," the farmer answered. "This could be another Yugoslavia."

We headed south, deeper into Pannonia. Through the rain-streaked windshield we could see the riches of the region and better understand Slovakia's paranoia about Hungarian intentions. The sheer amount of fresh plaster, new red tiles and German cars testifies to Southern Slovakia's wealth. Sadly, it also offered a poignant example of the way Slovaks still think about wealth. Mečiar's recent television addresses, in which he has pointed out that Hungarian-Slovaks have put much more money in the bank than other Slovaks, played on the fear that the "bread-basket" of Slovakia might slip from its grasp. No one in Slovakia ever talks about creating wealth; Slovaks often talk about firming up their grip on the wealth they already have.

The drive to the villages between the old riverbed and the diversion canal is enough to cast doubt on childhood ideas of a battle with "the elements." Here, the elements are either firmly at bay or capable of striking back with a vengeance. The power-plant in Gabčikovo is larger than the Suez dam and built of shoddy concrete. The diversion canal, while apparently solid,

is a homely site; for mile after mile we drove back north-west along the artificial island, barred at our final destination from the towns we had just visited by an unforgiving barrage.

The mayors of the villages cut off by the diversion -- Vojka, Bodiky and Babrohosti -- complained that its construction has killed off their villages. The Communists seized land for the diversion without much compensation, said Laszlo Nagy, mayor of Vojka. Because its construction had lengthened the commute to Šamorin and Bratislava by an hour, the population of the region had dropped by two-thirds over the past 20 years.

The villagers said that water in their wells in the area had dried out, but said they used piped water, so they are not concerned. It was residents on the Hungarian side, who do not have a central water supply, who have suffered, they said.

But the residents again said most of the damage had been done; the question now was not whether the government would stop construction, but rather whether it would make their lives a little easier by building a bridge to Šamorin. "It is impossible to stop the dam," Sigismund Mikoly said, "but it would help if we could have a bridge."

Again, the villagers feared the political uses of the dam more than the dam itself. The residents were dismayed by Čarnogurský's visit to the villages when he had insisted that the dam's construction must go ahead. But they despaired over the Mečiar government, from whom they do not expect to get a bridge. Worse, they fear they are being used.

Mikoly, a villager who commutes to a factory in Bratislava, is worried about the effect the dam issue is having on his relations with his Slovak co-workers. Mečiar's anti-Hungarian propaganda has effectively taken his co-workers' minds off problems like economic uncertainty, Mikoly said. "The Slovaks in the factory used to talk about higher prices," he said. "Now they talk about Gabčikovo."

Mikoly dismisses the Antall government's claim to represent him as absurd and fears that the Slovak government has used it "to show that we are against the dam only because we are Hungarian agents. But I feel like a citizen of Slovakia," Mikoly said. "We are pleased by the successes of

Hungarian artists and football players, but we are citizens of Slovakia and this is our home."

On an earlier trip I had gone even further into the Danube basin, all the way to Budapest, where I talked to William Roth of the Czechoslovak embassy to Hungary. Roth also complains about the Hungarian misuse of international diplomacy. In December 1991, the CSFR and Hungary aggreed to set up an EC commission to examine the dam; despite the agreement, the Hungarian government launched an "unnecessary diplomatic campaign," Roth said, against the dam once the Slovaks began diverting the river. Antall's government wrote to the Conflict Prevention Centre in Vienna, the Danube Commission, the International Court of Justice and the world's ten top politicians protesting Slovakia's "aggressive politics." Their claims were entirely exaggerated, Roth said.

Whatever the disadvantages of granting the Czechs and Slovaks equal status in the world's eyes after Jan. 1, 1993 (see my last newsletter), it will help the Slovak-Hungarian border to remain firm. Slovakia will inherit the borders agreed at the 1920 Treaty of Trianon; Hungary will exclude itself from the world community if it does not share this recognition, Roth said. Nonetheless, Roth worries about the ambitions of the Együttélés movement, noting that its leader, Mikos Duray, appeared on Budapest television regularly during the 1992 elections. Typical of Duray's comments, Roth said, was that he, a Hungarian-Slovak, "had no homeland, only a birthplace."

To conclude, our visit to the region showed that most of the damage to regions occupied by Hungarian-Slovaks -- the devastation of the countryside near the diversion point, the cleaving of several villages from the places where most of their residents work -- was done by the Communist regime. It's worth noting that the villagers in the region, even member of the Együttélés party, complained that the party's appeals to Budapest had only aggravated their concerns. It's also worth noting that Együttélés is not exactly gung-ho in support of the villagers' practical concerns, such as a bridge from the new island to Šamorin. It's usually problems, not solutions, that fire Együttélés up. This much they share with the Slovak nationalists they now oppose.

THE TONGUE SET FREE? LANGUAGE LAWS

Some historical points

Slovaks who call for an "official" language and an "official" culture are merely completing the nationalizing of bits of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The chain-reaction began in 1867, when Emperor Franz Josef acceded to Hungarian nationalism and granted Budapest half of a restructured "Dual Monarchy." Budapest quickly pulled the ladder up after itself; rather than push for a "federalized" Empire, the capital's politicians fought Czech self-government and "Magyarized" Hungary's own provinces, Slovakia and Croatia.

Gabor Gyáni, a Hungarian historian, explains that the Magyars offered their Slovak and Croat subjects a "contract:" they could enjoy upward mobility in a "liberal" society if they recognized that the nation guaranteeing that upward mobility was Hungarian, that its capital was Budapest, that its universities taught in Hungarian and that its major families, regardless of religion, were those of the Hungarian noblemen. According to my travelling companion, Prof. Stone, the Hungarians ferociously centralized the region's banking system in Budapest. The late 19th-century Budapest boom was on and Poszony (now Bratislava), the Hungarian capital for 300 years, went into decline.

Slovak society quickly split into those willing to marry into Hungarian families and transfer their loyalties and those unable to leave behind their rural roots. For whatever reason, Slovak Jews found it much easier to assimilate, Gyáni said.

Whether true or not, this explanation has been perverted to become the dividing line between "true Slovaks" and traitors, the latter being Magyarized Slovak Jews. Three years ago, when the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros sought to found his Central European University in Bratislava, Slovak nationalists protested against a "Budapest Jew" founding such an instrument of assimilation in Slovakia. This time, the language of the university was to be English, but, as any good Slovak nationalist will tell you, English is now the language of the international Jewish conspiracy.

Együttélés' concerns

The Együttélés movement fear three steps the Slovak government might take. The government might, they argue, weaken the rights Hungarian-Slovaks currently enjoy to use Hungarian in official contacts. It might cut back more severely on Hungarian education. Finally, the government might interpret the new Slovak constitution in a way that would erode the minority's political power.

The Language Law and education

In October 1990, the Slovak government, then dominated by the dissidents' VPN movement, established Slovak as the official language of the Slovak Republic. The law obliged state officials to use Slovak in their official business, to issue documents in Slovak and to mark all public places in Slovak.

The law, however, gave citizens the right to use other languages as well. Czech could be spoken in any official business in the republic. Furthermore, other languages could be used by both state officials and citizens wherever the native-speakers of the language made up more than 20 percent of the population. The law did not require state officials to know the language of the minority and obliged the officials to use Slovak when speaking to a native Slovak speaker.

Együttélés found the1990 law "discriminative and injurious." The 20 percent cut-off was too high, they said. Nor did the law ensure minorities the right to read laws in their native tongues; it banned all written contact with officials in any language but Slovak. Finally, it did not guarantee the right to put up additional, say, streets signs in another lanugage or the right to teach in anything but Slovak.

Együttélés complains that road signs in Hungarian have already been taken down in Southern Slovakia. The movement also fears a stronger language law requiring the use of Slovak in all official contacts might be passed.

The 1992 Slovak constitution

On September 1, 1992, the Slovak parliament adopted a new constitution for the Slovak Republic that declared the sovereignty of Slovak law. Although this formal declaration of sovereignty contradicted the Czechoslovak Federal Constitution, it was compatible with political reality;

Czech Premier Vaclav Klaus and Mečiar had already agreed to divide the state.

The new Slovak constitution was controversial in many ways. Other opposition parties joined Együttélés in complaining that it built a centralized state in which the state would prevail over local administration and the largest political party over the state. The latter was of particular concern to Együttélés, who planned to build up their strength in the local administration of Southern Slovakia.

Együttélés, however, also said that amendments protecting minority rights that they had proposed had been ignored. The party complained about Chapter Two, article 34, which states that the pursuit of rights, such as of free expression, "cannot lead to the breach of the integrity of the Slovak Republic or discrimination against other citizens;" rather than protect minority rights, Együttélés said, the government was protecting itself against minorities. Another clause from the same article, which allows minorities to established "associations," does not explicitly defend the political rights of such associations. "In other words," Együttélés complained, "the constitution provides the possibility to ban political organizations of national minorities."

Nor does the constitution guarantee the right to education in a minority's mother-tongue. As part of general education cut-backs, the Slovak government is planning to cut back on Hungarian education. Teaching in Hungarian is especially costly, since the Slovak Hungarians live in rural regions where more schools are needed to teach fewer people. (Compared to what Slovaks in Hungary have traditionally been offered, Hungarian education in Slovakia remains generous.)

Együttélés also points out that the head of news and sports production at Slovak television has cited the constitution in banning the use of Hungarian town names during the station's Hungarian broadcasts. Is this, they ask, a harbinger of worse treatment to come?

<u>Együttélés' solution: "self-determination"</u>
The peace treaties of 1920 and 1947, the international guarantors of the Czechoslovak federation, treated "the wish for self-determination . . . only in a very distorted form," according to Együttélés. The battle for more

Slovak autonomy has always been waged, the document says, between Czechs and Slovaks to the exclusion of other nations on Czechoslovak territory. While federalists may say they are fighting for the rights of citizens, they are merely "asserting that the country is a common state of two nations, and nobody else."

Other nations within the state ought therefore to organize by nationality too, Együttélés states, since the state's stability can only be guaranteed by "an adequate and equal assertion of the right of self-determination of all these groups." The key, Együttélés writes, is "cultural and territorial self-administration."

Back in Pannonia

Despite a recent highway department declaration to remove Hungarian signs, early every village between Bratislava and Budapest is clearly marked by two signs; a white one gives the name in Slovak, a blue one gives the name in Hungarian. The contrast reveals the emptiness of the "international proletarianism" Czechoslovak Communists mouthed. Many of the towns were given Slovak names not in 1920 but in 1948. The names of Slovak cultural heroes appear on the map like chess pieces arrayed in an aggressive assault; the deeper into Pannonia one goes, the more strident the names become. To the north, "Nové Zamky," or "New Castle," is merely a literal translation from the Hungarian. But a mere hour from Budapest stands "Štúrovo," as if the codifier of the Slovak language, Lúdovit Štúr, were himself standing guard against irredentism.

Štúrovo tumbles down a bank of the Danube so steep that the river is barely visible from the old town square. Rising from the river's mists on the opposite side is the Baroque dome of the cathedral of Esztergom, the pride of both towns. In the 19th century the residents of Štúrovo, then called Parkan, took ferries across the river to attend mass. In 1895 the towns built a stone bridge between them. The piles of the bridge, destroyed during the Second World War and never rebuilt, still stand.

Šturovo's mayor, Jan Oravec, is an ethnic Slovak who feels more comfortable speaking Hungarian. He belongs to no political party and flinches when "delegatia" ask him about minority rights. "You are the fifteenth delegation I've met who wanted to talk about minority rights," he complained. "When will anyone ask me about our economic problems?"

Last year, in an attempt to boost tourism by making more explicit his town's historical ties to the cathedral across the river, Oravec held a referendum on whether the town ought to change its name back to Parkan. Although the referendum won with 80 percent of the vote, the Slovak Interior Ministry blocked the move.

The ghost of Štúr had prevailed. "If it were any other name but Štúrovo," Oravec said, "we would have had no difficulty changing it." Instead, Oravec said, Slovak nationalists from other parts of the country had thanked the Ministry for blocking the change.

Oravec is dismissive of the fears of both Slovak and Hungarian activists. "Things are never so bad as they look at first sight," he said. "Both sides exaggerate the problems." Matica Slovenská, the ultra-nationalist Slovak cultural foundation, has only thirty members in Štúrovo. They meet in the town hall and, Oravec said, have no problems in town. It is the Matica Slovenská offices in other cities that regularly complain about Hungarians in Southern Slovakia. "I wish they would be active here," Oravec said, "but instead they go to Bratislava and make propaganda."

Oravec was just as impatient with Együttélés' complaints about the constitution and the language law. "It's not important what is in the constitution," he said, "but rather that there is tolerance and good-will on both sides." Együttélés leaders find it easier to criticize than discuss economics. "It's easier to show the effect of activities in a purely political issue," he said. "They can speak about the language law for hours and hours and then adopt the budget in five minutes." The Slovak government would be wise to meet Együttélés' demands, Oravec said; the party would then have to "prove its ability to discuss our economic problems."

In another attempt to boost tourism, Oravec has asked sought to rebuild the bridge across the Danube. While the Slovak government has put up its half, the Hungarian government has thus far refused. The deadline for making a big splash is quickly approaching; Oravec fears that if the bridge's 100th anniversary goes uncommemorated, the project will be dead.

Whither Pannonia?

Driving back up the Danube to Bratislava, I am reminded of how the Hungarian-Slovaks in Vojka hoped to teach their children with dwindling resources offered. The villagers recognized that education cuts were affecting Slovaks as well; they just hoped they'd be able to commute to the new district school more easily. They hoped the Slovak government would build a bridge for them.

Unfortunately, the representatives of the Hungarian-Slovaks aren't interested in building bridges, either of the metaphorical or literal sort. They are too obsessed with "official" languages and collective rights to build bridges between nationalities. They, like the Slovak government, have drunk too deeply from the wells of resentment that "Magyarization," then "Slavization," drilled. And Gabčikovo will fill these wells, unlike the water wells of Pannonia, to overflowing.

In his book Danube, the Italian Claudio Magris recalls how, at school, he and his classmates used to discuss the three names of Bratislava, and which they liked best; Bratislava, the Slovak name, Pressburg, the German one, or Poszony, the name in Hungarian. "The fascination of those three names bestowed a special glamour on a composite, multinational history, and someone's preference for one or the other was, in a childish way, a basic stance towards the "Weltgeist."

As schoolchildren, Magris and his classmates distinguished between the "German" world-view, the dour desire to make history, the rebellious chivalry of the Hungarians and the fertile patience of the Slovaks. But, ironically, these national identities flourished most vividly before each was linked to a state. The death of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and forty years of Communist abuse have reduced the latter two cultures to blind battalions of bureaucrats, unrestrained by strong local communities, uninterested in individuals, unhinged in their pursuit of state power. If either side needs a symbol of its folly, then a dam that blocks the flow of water from nation to nation should certainly be it.

Yours,

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