

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KOSICE: CITY-STATE IN A NATION-STATE

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

Conventional wisdom back home has it that Central Europe has been wracked by nationalism because "ancient hatreds," frozen still by the Cold War, have thawed out. The hidden premise is that the Soviet Bloc was good for something; at least it kept these unruly peoples at the edge of Europe under control.

The citizens of Kosice, the second-largest city in the newly-independent Slovakia, are as close to the "edge of Europe" as one could imagine, propped just sixty miles across an open plain from the former Soviet Union. It's a twelve-hour drive from the former Czechoslovak capital, Prague, and a brutal, if beautiful, six-hour trip over the Low and High Tatra mountains from the Slovak capital, Bratislava.

No city of the former Czechoslovakia would have more reason to be wracked by ethnic tension, given that it rests on such unstable ground. Like all of Slovakia, Kosice had been governed from Budapest for hundreds of years before the Czechoslovak federation was created out



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of the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian empire. But unlike any other major Slovak city, Kosice was given back to Hungary by the conquering Axis powers during World War II. None of the former federation's major cities has been tossed back and forth across as many national boundaries. One might think that Slovaks living there would embrace Slovak nationalism with even more fervor than Bratislavans do.

But that would be to mistake the close relationship between communism and nationalism. Both aspire to govern collectives, shape national or class destiny according to a centralizing plan. It is the citizens of Bratislava, the largest city and natural capital for Slovaks, that are grasping at the reins of central power. They have embraced a left-leaning nationalist government that promises them the prestige of an international capital and the power of ministries eager to shape the emerging nation. The citizens of Kosice, aware both that they could never govern nor, in their far-flung corner, be oppressively governed, have always preferred to solve their own problems. Failing that, they trusted the old Soviet communists in Prague more than they trust the new nationalist government in Bratislava.

Before last December's mayoral elections, Kosice ran short of hot water. It seems the state company was having some "payment problems" with the central government in Bratislava. Slovakia's nationalist prime minister, Vladimir Meciar visited the distressed city to campaign for his party's candidate. Meciar promised that he would work hard to restore the hot water if Kosice elected a "trustworthy" mayor.

Meciar's candidate lost by more than 8,000 votes to a 35-year-old scientist, Rudolf Bauer. Bauer ran as the candidate of the right-of-center coalition that governed Slovakia for the two years following the "Velvet Revolution," a coalition Meciar denounces regularly as "anti-Slovak."

After his election, Bauer negotiated his own agreement with the water company. And he has since stood for decentralization in all spheres of Slovak life, advocating quicker privatization to break ministerial control over the economy and restoration of strong regional and municipal government. His program has not endeared him to the nationalists 250 miles west. "It might true," he said cautiously, "that the Slovak government is slightly worried about such a strong region so far from Bratislava." But he remains popular in a city that has become the city-state for all suspicious of giving the new nation's capital too much power over their affairs.

Good taste and common sense

Kosice has always been a commercial center and was never a political capital. Its broad perpendicular streets are lined with low shops that hunch down over carriageways that lead into open yards. There goods were once packed for the journey down the "Amber Road," a trade route across the eastern plain. The city has fewer former ducal palaces than Bratislava and has no castle, but the Gothic cathedral to St. Elizabeth and the high dome of the city theater belie the ambitions of the city's former mercantile class. Perhaps because its residents never held nationalist aspirations that had to be bought off by public works projects, the city center escaped the poisonous concrete blocks so common in Bratislava. But for one fountain, lit at light by plastic color filters, it is unspoiled. Kosice is a sort of 18th-century Minneapolis, built on unpretentious but elegant commercial wealth.

Good taste and common sense still go hand in hand. At the Julius Jakoby art museum on the main square, one can either see 20th-century Slovak etchings or rent a Sylvester Stallone video. The Dielo gallery across the street offers oil paintings and one-hour color film developing.

Free of Slovak political pomp, the ethnic and intellectual communities live in peace. In Bratislava, "cosmopolitan" is an insult, implying hidden loyalty to Israel, Budapest or, most likely, both. Kosice prides itself on its "cosmopolitanism" and has attracted some of Slovakia's finest writers, such as Marcel Stryko and Egon Bondy.

The only thing Kosice residents find intolerable is Bratislava.



Pushing decentralization

"Kosice without independence," the 'Challenge to the Citizens of Kosice,' screams -- "Kosice without a future!"

Dzmina, a radical opposition newspaper based in Kosice, last summer printed the 'Challenge,' a tongue-in-cheek petition calling for a 'sovereign East Slovakia.' It was an old joke in the former Czechoslovakia that if Slovakia broke free, Kosice would demand a "safe corridor" to Prague.

Although it hasn't yet issued its own currency, Kosice is Slovakia's center for groups campaigning for decentralization. While the mayor leads the charge for more local autonomy, citizens' groups and newspapers challenge Bratislava's ambition to control the new state alone.

An independent teachers' trade union, founded in Bratislava in 1989, has since moved to the eastern capital. Its director, Peter Bulla, was consulting with a local branch about an upcoming strike when I met him. The ground in eastern Slovakia was fertile for a revolt against the Slovak ministries, he said. "If we in Slovakia once complained about Prago-centralism," he said, "then what is happening now in Bratislava is much worse."

Bulla complained that the new government was trying to bring back to its ministries many powers that the first post-revolutionary government had tried to distribute to local groups. For example, he said, the 1989-1992 government had established 43 local school boards across Slovakia and had given them the power to choose their own directors. The Ministry of Education, Bulla said, was to appoint formally directors whom the local boards had chosen.

But the government of the current Slovak prime minister, Vladimir Meciar, had reversed this policy, Bulla said. First, the Minister of Education, Matus Kucera, dismissed 40 out of 43 of the school board heads. He then appointed new heads from his ministry in Bratislava without consulting the local school boards.

Worse still, Bulla said, the appointments were doled out to the politically loyal, not the qualified. He showed me a copy of a letter that a member of the prime minister's party in the Slovak parliament had written to the Minister of Education. The letter recommended that the minister appoint the brother of the premier to be the head of the school board in the district of Trencin. The prime minister's brother was duly appointed although, Bulla said, he had not been recommended by the local school board.

"If you have a law that says someone should be appointed from below, but it is ignored and people are appointed from the top -- what is that but centralization?" Bulla said.

The example fits into a pattern that opposition journalists are only now uncovering -- that is, that the political party of the prime minister, the "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia," is working in co-operation with state agencies as a machine of pure political patronage and revenge.

The opposition newspaper *Slovenský týždeň* has recently discovered a list compiled by the party's office in the village of Roznava and sent to the Slovak Ministry of the Interior. The list appears to be a collection of names of "enemies" of the prime minister's party working in state hospitals, schools and administration in and near the village. The letter accompanying it asks that the people listed be dismissed. "Later developments proved that the list was accurate," *Slovenský týždeň* editor Dusan Klinger said, "because these people were removed."

Like many people disgusted by the corruption of the state, Bulla now promotes reforms common among Thatcherites or Reaganites -- a school voucher scheme, an emphasis on local control and volunteerism. If such ideas are ever going to take root in Slovakia, they will put down their first shoots in Kosice. In last June's national elections, the right received three times as much support there than in the country at large. And, despite pressure from the central government, they choose Rudolf Bauer to be their mayor.

Bauer now finds himself fighting "Brati-centrism" on several fronts. To the frustration of the Slovak parliament, he's leading the charge to break Slovakia up into 17 historical regional districts, at least two of which would be dominated by Hungarian-Slovaks. To the anger of the Ministry of the Interior, he'd like to take over more powers to police the border with Ukraine. And to the dismay of the Slovak Foreign Ministry, he'd like Kosice to take part in the "Carpathian Euroregion," a scheme to promote contacts with cities in neighboring countries such as Uzgorod in Ukraine and Debrecen in Hungary. Roman Hofbauer, the Slovak Minister of Transportation, has argued that success of the opposition in Kosice is destabilizing the country and frightening investors.

The most controversial of Bauer's positions is his support of strong regional government, since it runs contrary to the Slovak parliament's own administrative scheme. The "historic" map that Bauer supports would give regional government to two districts in southern Slovakia -- Dunajska Streda and Komarno -- that run from east to west along Slovakia's border with Hungary. They would continue to consist almost entirely of Hungarian-Slovaks. The Slovak government's plan, by comparison, would divide Slovakia into seven districts that would run from north to south. The



Rudolf Bauer, Mayor of Kosice

Hungarian-Slovak town of Dunajska Streda would share its district with the Slovak town of Trnava, which would become the administrative capital.

Moderate Hungarian-Slovak parties, such as the Hungarian Civic Party, oppose the plan. They argue that a collective has a collective right to remain a collective. It's not their voice, however, that speaks loudest for the minority. The Egyuteles ("Co-existence") movement, amplified both by being the only Hungarian party in parliament and by choosing strong language, calls the scheme part of a process of "velvet ethnic cleansing."

Coincidental allies as extreme as Egyuteles have hurt Bauer. As the mayor of a city that Hungary swallowed up during World War II, he is easily portrayed by the Slovak government as an ally of Hungarian irredentists. The merits of decentralization in a post-communist state have been quickly obscured by fears of threats to a newly-independent nation.

But Bauer argues that it is in the interests of the Slovak people to decentralize the government, since democratically-elected regional administrations are less likely to provoke their neighbors across state borders. "I am sure that the second level of regional government should be created that wouldn't be so dependent on the government because they would be elected from below," he said. "The central government has a tendency to destabilize."



On the Slovak-Ukrainian border

But will Bauer, an apparently gentle man, be able to muster the political will to survive a government willing to practice ward politics with the hot water supply? Miro Prochazka, an editor at the pro-government daily newspaper in Kosice who is nonetheless critical of Meciar, doubted it. "Kosice is in a bad situation because of his (Bauer's) election," Prochazka said. "The government will decide, O.K., we won't give them any money."

Newspaper wars

Prochazka should know about playing rough. His newspaper, *Luc*, has been at the heart of one of Slovakia's most savage newspaper wars. The opening salvos of the war showed that Slovakia's new ruling party was disposed to equate state, nation and political party. But the continued success of dailies that criticize the government suggests that, even if the mayor they support is too gentle, they themselves are more than up to the fight.

Luc ("Ray") and another eastern Slovak daily, *Slovenský východ* ("Slovakia's East") have been fighting each other for readers, writers, publishers -- even office space -- since *Luc* was established after the June 1992 elections.

Before the vote, *Slovenský Východ* ruled the roost as Kosice's only major daily, a position it had occupied since 1919. After the 1989 elections, the newspaper was sold to Dusan Klinger, who also became editor-in-chief. Klinger fired most of the paper's staff and pushed its orientation to the right.

Slovenský Východ was so savage in its criticism of the party that eventually won the election, the "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia," that its fate was discussed at pre-election rallies. Meciar, the movement's leader and current premier, was asked if would close the newspaper if he won the elections. No, he answered, "but they will pay for the mistakes they have made." (See CRR-4).

A few days after Meciar's victory, *Slovenský Východ* was evicted from its offices in a building owned by a state construction company. The director of the company established a new newspaper -- *Lux*. According to Prochazka himself, the paper's staff consisted mostly of journalists who had worked for *Slovenský Východ* under the Communist regime.

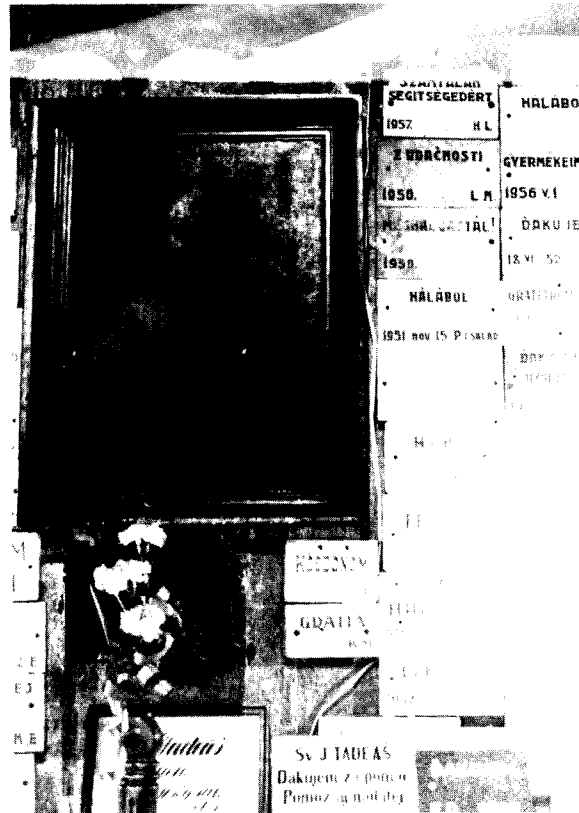


Meciar's enemies quickly accused him of having used state funds to establish the newspaper. Jan Holcik, who as Minister of Industry had presided over the department close to state companies, claimed Meciar had given the construction company 40 million crowns to establish *Lux*. Prochazka denied the charge and in turn accused former Federal Prime Minister Marian Calfa, a member of the right-wing party that Meciar defeated, of giving the editor of the *Slovenský Východ* funds for its privatization.

Based on what I know of the backgrounds of the players involved, both accusations ring true, although I haven't seen a paper trail proving either. But it's the character and circulations of the two newspapers since their battle began that sheds light on nature of the new nation's second city.

Prochazka, although an editor at a largely pro-Meciar paper, is quicker to defend the attitude of the former Communist regime toward eastern Slovakia than that of the new government. In the 1950s and 1960s, Prochazka said, the government had industrialized the then agricultural economy. Communist leader Vasil Bilak, himself from eastern Slovakia, had provided a "good living standard" through the development of East Bloc markets for the region's products, such as steel.

Those markets had been destroyed by post-1989 government's haste to move west, Prochaska said, prompting the rise of Slovak nationalism in most of the republic. But the former Communists, renamed the "Party of the Democratic Left," had defeated Meciar in Eastern Slovakia, he pointed out. The success of the



Remembrance plaques at St. Alzbetina church in Latin, Hungarian and Slovak

Communists in the national elections and the right in the vote for Kosice's mayor showed that Eastern Slovakia has never put its faith in Bratislava, since both sides of the political divide shared a faith in the former federation. Above all, Prochazska said, the people of eastern Slovakia "feared Bratislava centrism." Their fears, Prochazska said, had been justified. Meciar had turned out to be a "dictator."

Whatever Prochazska's personal opinions, his paper has kept its pro-Meciar line. It has clearly cost them. *Lux* has not made much of a dent in the newspaper market, Prochazska said, adding that he feared for his job.



No such gloom over at Slovensky Vychod. The newspaper has lost some of its pre-election readers, Klinger said, but only because the state distributor had blocked the paper. "We sell 40,000 copies and are having problems with the government," Klinger said, "while they (*Lux*) produce 3,000 and can only sell

700." If *Slovensky Vychod* has lost readers to any other paper, it is more likely that the savagely right-wing weekly *Domino* has picked them up. *Domino*, started after the 1992 elections, has jumped from 10,000 readers to 15,000 in the past three months.

Klinger did not strike me as being a typical reformer. He had, for example, copies of Bilak's books on his shelf and the manner of a street-fighting city editor without much time for ideology. But he was clearly satisfied that his paper had struck a political chord that sold copies, regardless of the theory behind it.

The paper makes a point of publishing letters from disillusioned Meciar supporters, Klinger said. All had two themes in common, he said. "People are disappointed with the pace of economic reform and the decision to split Czechoslovakia without a referendum." A year after it had won the elections, Meciar's movement was "broken in this region," Klinger said. "Only pensioners remain in it."

The leaders of Meciar's party in Kosice deny that their movement has collapsed. Meciar supporters "took a political holiday" during the mayoral elections, according to Dusan Dugasek, head of the movement in one of the city's districts. He admitted, however, that his party had fewer than 100 members in his part of the city.

A suspicious second city

The success in Kosice of the political parties that wanted to keep Czechoslovakia whole, whether Communist or Thatcherite, suggests that the city is more dominated by "anti-nationalism" than by any ideology. And given that the party that led Slovakia to independence has little to offer ideologically but a "uniquely Slovak way" to reform, it seems safe to bet that Kosice will remain in opposition. "History" and "ethnic tension" have no role to play there. Rather, the city fears that Bratislava is using both "history" and "ethnic tension" as props in its own political drama.

Slovaks in eastern Slovakia were happy to be governed from Prague because they trusted it, according to historian Ondrej Halaga, author of a recent book on the development of Kosice. "Prague has long been a center of civilization. That's why the standard of living is high there. Bratislava is a young center that wants to have everything immediately."

"People here are more afraid of Bratislava centrism than they were of Prague centrism," Halaga said. "Prague centrism is more developed and cultural. Bratislava centrism is more hungry."

But Kosice's fear of the misuse of history left me rather optimistic about its future. One can breathe free on its wide streets and easily find friends too dignified to believe in the "rebirth" of "an oppressed nation." A friend traveling with me and interested in Kosice's history asked Halaga how to get in touch with him. "Call me at the academy," he said. "Or fax me at Domino."

Yours,



Chandler Rosenberger