

Iván Halász

2016 Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia and the Political Parties of Ethnic Hungarians¹

Introduction to the Slovakian election system

On Saturday 5 March 2016, Slovakian voters went to the polls again. Since the first free elections after the political changeover, this was the ninth occasion that citizens could express their will in this way. In Slovakia, formed on 1 January 1993, this was the seventh election for the 150-member unicameral Parliament (i.e. the National Council) in Slovakia. On the other hand, this was the third occasion since the 2009 schism of the political parties representing the Hungarian minority in Slovakia that each of them competed on its own (2010, 2012, 2016).

Although there have been some minor amendments and corrections during the past quarter of a century, the election system of Slovakia has shown a remarkable stability since 1992. In other words, its fundamental rules have not undergone any significant modifications. It is still a proportionate election system in which voters can cast their votes for party lists nominated by the individual political parties and movements. The threshold of entrance is 5%, but it shows a growing trend in the case of electoral coalitions. Currently, the whole country is a single constituency, so each party drafts a national list.

The order on the party lists is determined by the parties, but the voters can also have a say. They can circle a maximum of four candidates on the party list whom they particularly like, and who can thus rise to the top of the list, overtaking even the list-leading party president if an additional 3% of those voting for this particular list share their preference. This model is called preferential voting. Ever since 3% (instead of 10%) is enough for a candidate to make it to the top of the list, the importance of this method has increased. Therefore there

are two simultaneous election contests going on: between the party lists on the one hand and between the candidates themselves.²

Participation in the elections is allowed only for Slovakian citizens above 18, so – as opposed to European parliamentary elections and local and medium-level district (county) elections – foreigners settled down in Slovakia have absolutely no say on the national level. In fact, Slovakia is quite liberal regarding all non-national level elections, for it grants participation in the local and national elections not only for EU citizens, but also to all legally immigrated foreigners of majority age.³

On the other hand, the Slovakian regulations do not provide any preferential treatment for the ethnic minorities of Slovakia; that is, the parties wishing to represent the interests of ethnic minorities must meet the same requirements as the other parties. In the current demographic situation, such regulations allow two Slovakian ethnic minorities to get into the Parliament on their own right (i.e. with an own ethnic party): the Hungarians and the Roma. While the Hungarians have always succeeded at that since 1990, the fragmented and divided Roma community has never been able to achieve that so far. True enough, until now the Roma themselves have been trying to get their representatives into the Parliament with the help of other – national – parties, but even these efforts have produced a limited success. At the last elections, the Most – Híd, the Hungarian-Slovakian mixed party, the list of candidates of the loose formation called Simple People and Independent Personalities (OLANO) and the governing SMER-SD (i.e. Direction – Social Democracy) accorded this chance to the Roma. However, that did not help the Roma community, either. Consequently, in the following, we will discuss the election results and performance of the parties dedicated to the representation of the Hungarian minority.

It should be noted in advance that an electoral system based on the principle of proportionate representation usually suits national communities similar to ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia. Although according to the latest (2011) census data, the number of Hungarians in Slovakia has dropped below the magic number of 500,000 (the precise headcount being 458,467 persons)⁴, and their proportion

² About the evolution of the Slovakian electoral system, see Peter Novotný: *Vývoj volebných pravidiel na Slovensku (1990-2010)* <http://www.infovolby.sk/index.php?base=data/parl/2010/analyzy/1272387025.txt>

³ On this topic see Iván Halász: *Migránsok és a választójog. A választások „transzborderizálása” a közép-európai térségben.* In Halász, Iván (ed.): *A migránsok politikai integrációja a visegrádi államokban.* Budapest: NKE. 2014.

⁴ <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

¹ This paper has been prepared in the framework of the incubator project called “The Evolution of the Electoral System and the Functioning of Party Regimes in East Central Europe”, which is conducted at the Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

within the entire society fluctuates around 9%, they still constitute a medium-sized ethnic minority, which could be capable of achieving appropriate and proportionate representation in the national legislative body on the condition of adequate political advocacy (i.e. unanimous self-representation). At the same time, this system suits not only the local Hungarians, but the whole of Slovakian society as well, which remains extremely fragmented and diverse in terms of regional, socio-cultural and denominational characteristics. In the Central European region, Slovakia can still be regarded as the country that has preserved the most from the multi-ethnic character that used to be so typical of this region: the ratio of people with different ethnic affiliations is still around 15-20%.

The general outcome and trends of the 2016 parliamentary elections

One of the keywords of the evaluation of the 2016 parliamentary elections was “surprise”. The results published after the careful calculations stupefied nearly everyone, especially in comparison with the last forecasts published two weeks prior to the election day.⁵ But the actual results came as a surprise even in light of the exit-poll results registered on the very day of the elections upon the commission of Markíza TV. The following table is an indication of the unexpected results and divergences:

Party	Results achieved in 2016 (%)	Exit-poll results on the day of election	Forecasts ¹ (FOCUS) (%)	Results in 2012 ²
Direction-SD	28.28	27.30	34.10	44.41
Liberty and Solidarity	12.10	13.30	5.10	5.88
Simple People and Independent Personalities	11.02	11.20	6.40	8.55
Slovak National Party	8.64	8.00	8.10	4.55
Kotleba: People's Party – Our Slovakia	8.04	6.80	2.00	1.58

⁵ This two-week moratorium is a new element in the Slovakian election regulations. In 2014 a new, complex electoral law was adopted.

We Are One Family – Boris Kolár	6.62	5.90	4.10	did not exist
Híd – Most	6.50	7.30	8.00	6.89
Network	5.60	6.70	13.70	
Christian Democratic Movement	4.94	5.0	7.50	8.82
Party of the Hungarian Community	4.04	3.6	3.60	4.28
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union	0.26		1.70	6.09

¹See:

http://www.focus-research.sk/files/n184_Volebne%20preferencie%20politickych%20stran_februar%202016.pdf

²See:

<http://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2012/graf/graf1sr.jsp@lang=sk.htm>

The 2016 election results reflect a significant reshuffling of the stakeholders of the Slovakian political spectrum. Certain analysts wrote on the day after the elections that the angry voters had, in fact, slain the traditional Slovakian party system. Although this is only partially true, the trends seem to be quite evident: the voters turned against the old traditional parties and punished them. After its long-lasting agony, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ)⁶ was eliminated from the Parliament, which used to be the flagship of the Slovak centre-right forces that served as the main engine of the radical (and economically relatively successful) reforms between 1998 and 2006. This formerly influential party pocketed a mere 6,938 votes at the March elections! Yet, the biggest loser of the elections on 5 March was not this party⁷, but the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) that dropped out from the Parliament unexpectedly⁸, a

⁶ This party was created by the successful two-time Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, who led the party for more than ten years.

⁷ Its drop-out had been in the air for a few years already.

⁸ The Christian Democratic Movement was created by the anti-Communist Catholic alternative thinkers in the hectic months of the political changeover, who hoped that the political Catholicism that had always been strong throughout the Slovak political history would again become a decisive political force in Slovakia. Therefore they tried to harmonize the values advocated by the Slovak political Catholicism (whose past had not been immaculate) and modern western Christian democracy and forge a party fully committed to democratic values. About the history and evolution of this party, see Iván Halász: A szlovák pártrendszer főbb törésvonalai és regionális összefüggései. In Ábrahám, Barna; Gereben, Ferenc; Stekolics, Rita

party which had been present in the Slovakian legislation since 1990 without interruption.

Since the parliamentary presence of all the other current parties of the Parliament can look back on a much shorter history, the latter was considered as an unparalleled achievement. The only exception to that is the Slovak National Party that has also been present in the Parliament since 1990, but not uninterruptedly, for – as it has been mentioned before – it did not make it into the Parliament for two terms (first between 2002 – 2006, then again between 2012 – 2016). But now it has returned to the Parliament triumphantly. With that, it has become the party with the longest parliamentary history, for there is no other political formation present there that could trace back “its family tree” till 1990.⁹

While the old and traditional political parties seem to have taken the heaviest blow, the real winners are the extreme right nationalists and protest parties of various nature and political orientation as well as new – hence somewhat unusual – “familiar” political formations. Although the turn has taken place now, some of these trends that have become conspicuous now have been around in Slovakian politics for a while. However, as these trends are currently appearing in accumulation, the situation appears even more dramatic in the eyes of many.¹⁰ To what extent it should be considered dramatic remains to be seen in the upcoming years.

(eds.): *Nemzeti és regionális identitás Közép-Európában*. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK. 2003. 474-475.

⁹ What is more, the leaders of the national party like to say that they are the oldest Slovak political party that was organized as early as in 1871 against Hungarianization, and it was considered to be the main party of the Slovaks living in the territory of Hungary till 1918. It played a substantial role in Slovakian politics also between the two world wars. Its activity reached its zenith during World War II. But this party – fundamentally leaning on national conservative and mainly Lutheran middle classes – did not have much to do with that party voicing civil nationalist, anti-minority and sometimes outright radical slogans that was formed in the turmoil of the political changeover (i.e. in spring 1990), and put the achievement of an independent Slovak state on its banner. In Slovakia, nationalists usually come into power as part of the national / right-wing / populist bloc(s). The Slovak National Party (SNS) was in power twice for a longer period of time: first from 1992 to 1998, then from 2006 to 2010. Since the foundations of the Slovak neo-capitalism were laid down in those years, the SNS that profited from the large-scale privatization did not turn into an anti-regime extremist party despite all its radical nationalist slogans, but into a rather conventional, almost civil party incorporated into the traditional political system that had no interest to set the existing social-economic system upside down.

¹⁰ On Monday after the elections, the daily *Újszó* appeared with the following headline: “Electoral Catastrophe”. *Újszó*, 7 March 2016. 1.

Although officially the main winner of the elections was the Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), it could be considered as a sort of “victorious loser” of the 2016 elections due to its unexpected loss of 400,000 votes. While the SMER-SD looks almost like an “old trouper”, this is only partially true because this political formation was set up at the turn of the millennium, and the first time it ran for MP seats was at the 2002 parliamentary elections.¹¹ It first came into power in 2006.¹² In 2010, it lost the elections unexpectedly, as a result of which the heterogeneous centre-right civil coalition could form a government. However, the latter fell apart due to internal tensions in autumn 2011, which opened the way before the SMER-SD’s landslide victory in 2012. Most probably, it was only the Slovakian proportionate election system that prevented this party from winning a qualified (three fifths) majority on its own, required for amending the Constitution. In light of the present fragmented results, it is unlikely that any party would succeed at that in the foreseeable future.¹³

It turned out right after the elections that it would be extremely hard to form a coalition government because for any operative coalition, the parties that were supposed to form an alliance were located

¹¹ About the beginnings of the party, see Iván Halász: A szlovák pártrendszer főbb törésvonalai és regionális összefüggései. In Ábrahám, Barna; Gereben, Ferenc; Stekovics, Rita (eds.): *Nemzeti és regionális identitás Közép-Európában*. Piliscsaba: PPKE BTK. 2003. 477.

¹² Criminal lawyer and founder of the party, Robert Fico started his political career in the Party of the Democratic Left, but he quit at the end of the 1990s and created his own party, which defined itself in the beginning as an eclectic and pragmatic (neither left-wing, nor right-wing) party. It shifted to the left only later when it became clear that a vacuum was about to be created in the centre-left political arena. At that point, the SMER-SD began to integrate the various smaller leftist parties and applied for admission among the European Socialists, who invited it after some hesitation to join their ranks. However, the doubts of the European Socialists have not been entirely dissipated ever since, especially because the SMER-SD was willing to form a coalition with the openly nationalist right-wing Slovak National Party in 2006 and dropped a few anti-Roma lines, and many were convinced that it fostered a good relationship with the so-called oligarchs who had become wealthy during the privatization. As a matter of fact, this formation, which officially still defines itself as a Social Democratic party, differs quite ostensibly from the traditional West European Social Democratic parties in many respects. In addition to its above mentioned relationships with oligarchs, it often tries to saddle Slovak national sentiments, it is on good terms with the established churches, and it attempts to compensate its concessions made to the local plutocracy in the 1990s in the realm of domestic affairs by (otherwise useful) measures that seem populist. Such measures include cost-free travel for old-age pensioners and students on state-own railways, certain compensations of overhead costs, etc.

¹³ For more details about the general results and characteristics of the elections, see Iván Halász: A 2016-os szlovák választások. *Parlamentari Szemle*. 2016, 1 (1). 93 – 112.

at quite different poles of the political spectrum, far from each other. Because of that, many people thought that early elections would be inevitable. Finally, Prime Minister Robert Fico, who was visibly terrified on the night of the elections, demonstrated a remarkable political flexibility and skilfulness, and formed his new coalition government with an impressive promptness. To this must have contributed the fact that his potential political partners were also somewhat baffled by the outcomes, especially by their own losses and the gains of the extremists. In the end, the coalition of the “oldies” was set up (composed of the SMER-SD, the Slovak National Party, the Most – Híd and the political formation called Network – which turned out to be very short-lived before summer).

This coalition brought an unprecedented turn in the post-political-changeover history of Slovakia: no party representing the Hungarian minority had ever been or allowed to be part of a coalition that also included the nationalist Slovak National Party. What is more, even a coalition between the Hungarian parties and the SMER-SD, pursuing an anti-minority policy before 2010, had been only a political fantasy. All of that changed in spring 2016. In addition to the above, another factor that may have contributed to this turn was that under the leadership of the new party president, Andrej Danko, the political style of the Slovak nationalists became more sophisticated, and the Most – Híd party representing Hungarians (as well) became more integrated with the political circles of Bratislava. We could also say that the party’s image turned a bit “more Slovak”.

The originally four-member coalition government shrank to three members in August 2016 because the Network party practically caved in due to its internal conflicts, and its five representatives went to sit in the rows of the Most – Híd. Thus, Slovakia is currently governed by the coalition of the SMER-SD (with 49 MPs), the Slovak National Party and the Most – Híd (each with 15-member factions), where a minimum of 76 MPs are needed for a government majority (now the coalition has 79 MPs). The scope of the present paper does not extend to the assessment of their performance, which would be in any case impossible with such short hindsight. Therefore, we will now move on to the evaluation of the election results of the ethnic Hungarian community.

The performance and results of the parties undertaking the representation of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Slovakia

Clearly, the 2016 general elections yielded negative results for both parties with Hungarian interests. The Hungarian-Slovak mixed party, the Most – Híd, which got into the National Council, and the Party of the Hungarian Community (MKP), which could not reach the parliamentary threshold for the third time in a row (2010, 2012, 2016)¹⁴ did worse than four years ago both proportionately and nominally. This result is documented by the table below:

Election year	MKP (%)	MKP (persons)	Most – Híd (%)	Most – Híd (persons)
2010	4.33 %	109 638	8.12 %	205 538
2012	4.28 %	109 483	6.89 %	176 088
2016	4.04 %	105 495	6.5 %	169 593

The above table reveals that the performance of both parties has been declining. The MKP seems to have locked itself into an ethnic ghetto from which it cannot break out, not even through the intermediary of and with other help from Hungary. This should not necessarily be the case for the MKP was an active member of the Slovakian government coalition for many years as the Hungarian Coalition Party and an ardent contributor to the opposition’s activities. Apparently, not even the partial opening was of help in that respect, an opening that the party – quite rightly – initiated towards the civil sphere and the youth organizations when it came to the candidates included in the party list.

The Most – Híd, showing more and more signs of political wear and tear, did not perform too well at these elections despite the fact that it tried to be even more open to Slovak politicians and address their electorate pool. This is especially true for the MPs and voters of the aforementioned Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ). However, SDKÚ basically fell apart before the elections.

¹⁴ Up until 2012, the Party of the Hungarian Community was called the Party of the Hungarian Coalition. At that point they decided that although they would keep at least the acronym, they would choose a name more consistent with reality. This decision must have been related to the fact that this party defines itself as the only truly Hungarian party in Slovakia (a view shared by the Budapest government as well). However, their election results have not confirmed this self-definition so far.

Some of their representatives with a strong profile (especially former Minister of Justice Lucia Žitňanská) joined the ranks of the Most – Híd, and for some time it seemed that the Hungarian-Slovak mixed party would obtain the Bratislava voters of this ailing party.

But as it turned out in March, this was not exactly how it happened. The SDKÚ voters must have looked for a more radical opposition alternative than the Most – Híd. The fact that they indeed found one is demonstrated by the results of the radically right-wing liberal Liberty and Solidarity in the capital. Possibly, this choice was also influenced by the fact that one month before the elections, Béla Bugár, a professional political veteran in Slovakia was reluctant to exclude with certainty the possibility of a coalition with Fico's party.

The number of the parliamentary mandates of the Most – Híd has undergone the following evolution over the past six years:

Election year	Number of mandates obtained	Number of Hungarian MPs from that
2010	14	7
2012	13	9
2014	11	7

Although the Most – Híd was created with the aim of promoting pacification between Hungarians and Slovaks, and with a view to that, it added several popular Slovak politicians empathizing with Hungarians in distinguished positions to its list, it could not achieve a real breakthrough among the voters of Slovak identity. One thing is for certain: a significantly higher number of Slovak voters cast their ballot for this party than for the MKP – the real question is whether their ballots are proportionate to the number of mandates accorded to candidates of non-Hungarian descent. At the same time, it is also a fact that since we are dealing with Slovak liberal personalities who are relatively popular and well-known among Slovakian Hungarians, they usually do quite well at the preferential voting, which obviously facilitates their progression on the list of candidates.

Concerning the results and the mandate distribution of 2016, it should be noted in parentheses that when the Most – Híd's intention to create a coalition with the SMER-SD was revealed, MP Zsolt Simon immediately quit the Most – Híd faction and the party itself. This was a serious loss for the party because Simon had been at the

forefront from the very beginning, and also because as a rich agrarian businessman, he is an influential figure with a network of relations in the Slovakian agricultural sector. When the smallest coalition party, the Network (Siet) fell apart in summer 2016, its faction and membership, the five MPs still willing to support the government, joined the ranks of the Most – Híd. This group included the young Katalin Cséfalvy, who has Hungarian roots and who used to be one of the Vice-Presidents of the Network. With this transfer, the Most – Híd faction – now composed of 15 members – has eight MPs of Hungarian descent.

The number of ethnic Hungarian Slovak MPs has almost always been somewhat higher than the number of the mandates held by the ethnic Hungarian parties using Hungarian slogans. The reason for that is that ethnic Hungarians constitute a relatively well-integrated minority in Slovakia whose members sometimes pursue a political career in other national parties with a Slovak orientation. In the first years after the political changeover, this was most typical of the Communist successor party, the Party of the Democratic Left, which delegated altogether four MPs of Hungarian descent through its list to the National Council of Slovakia in 1990.¹⁵ During the first parliamentary term, the Slovak Christian Democratic Movement also tried to attract Hungarian voters of the Catholic faith by having a representative of Hungarian descent.¹⁶ Moreover, between 2010 and 2012, the faction of the Liberty and Solidarity party of the Slovak liberals included MP Szilárd Somogyi of Hungarian descent. Most likely, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) – dominant for a long time – , which gave the country the three-time Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1990-1992, 1992-1994, 1994-1998) as well as a lot of trouble, also had some politicians with Hungarian ties, who, however, did not advertise themselves as such. At the 2016 elections, two persons got into the Parliament in the colours of other parties without a specific Hungarian orientation: the above mentioned Katalin Cséfalvy and Gábor Grendel. Grendel has pursued his political career in a small party called NOVA, founded by Daniel Lipšic, his former supervisor and former Christian Democratic Minister of Justice, then of Internal Affairs.¹⁷ This formation also competed in the elections and won a mandate on the list of Simple People and Independent Personalities.

¹⁵ Öllös, László: A magyar pártok programjai. In Fazekas, József and Hunčík, Péter (eds.): *Magyarok Szlovákiában (1989-2004)*. Vol. I. Somorja – Dunaszerdahely: Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet – Lilium Aurum Könyvkiadó. 2004. 76. Footnote 3.

¹⁶ Ibid, 54.

¹⁷ Grendel was the spokesperson of the Minister of Internal Affairs at the time.

Although the official political administration of Budapest has been reluctant to accept the Most – Híd formation as a Hungarian party since 2010, the situation is much more complicated than that. A significant part (basically, the majority) of the ethnic Hungarians of Slovakia who take part actively in the elections vote for this party, and they do this despite the fact that the Hungarian public service media (i.e. the one under government influence) has demonstrated a clear preference for the Party of the Hungarian Community (MKP). The bulk of the local activists and leaders of the Most – Híd and the MKP used to pursue their political career within the unified Party of the Hungarian Coalition (before 2009). While some of the voters with a Slovak identity have clearly identified with the programme of the Most – Híd, the support coming from this electorate is not even close to the original hopes. On Monday after the elections, *Új Szó* calculated that in the northern districts where there are few Hungarians and the number of mixed marriages is also smaller, a total of 37,518 persons voted for this mixed party (versus 522 votes cast for the Party of the Hungarian Community).¹⁸

In the southern districts, the two parties finished neck and neck. In the following southern districts, the Most – Híd came in first among the Hungarian parties: Bratislava and its surroundings, Senec, Galanta, Šaľa, Nitra, Nové Zámky, Lučenec, Rožňava, Košice and Michalovce districts. The MKP did better in Dunajská Streda, Komarno, Levice, Veľký Krtýš, Rimavská Sobota and Trebišov districts.¹⁹ What follows from the above is that in the two most Hungarian southern districts (i.e. with the most compact Hungarian population) (Dunajská Streda and Komarno), the MKP outperformed the Most – Híd²⁰, but the latter achieved better results in the north and in the proximity of bigger towns (i.e. Bratislava and Košice). That could be possibly put down to the bigger proportion of mixed marriages, but this must be only one of the many reasons.

An additional problem is that voter participation was by far the lowest in South Slovakia. For instance, in the districts of Komarno, Rimavská Sobota, Trebišov and Michalovce, less than 50% of the electorate went to the polls. With that, these southern districts were lagging behind the national average by nearly 10%. Since the whole

of Slovakia is a single constituency, this did not help the cause of Hungarian representation, either.

The last opinion polls before the elections predicted much better results for the Most – Híd than what happened in reality. MVK, Focus Agency and Polis predicted 7%²¹, 8% and 9.2% for Béla Bugár's party, respectively. Some optimistic party activists anticipated a two-digit performance. Compared to that, the actual figures were quite disappointing as the party received only 6.5%.²² The MKP oscillated around the entrance threshold for many months, being usually just below it and seldom above. As a matter of fact, the Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) Slovak liberal party was in similar shoes for a long time, but in the end, they came in second at the elections with 12.1%. A few months before the elections, the leaders of the two parties just below the threshold considered running together on a unified list. The conclusion of an official election coalition was out of the question because then they would have had to obtain 7% of the votes.²³ With a joint-mixed list, however, they still would have had to surpass the 5%-limit.

True enough, apparently, the two parties were not entirely compatible with each other in terms of ideology. While the MKP defines itself more as a Christian conservative party, the SaS is regarded as a party with radical liberal views, at least in economic matters and concerning the legalization of light drugs. On the other hand, the SaS has always been flexible about these issues: same-sex marriage is not a matter of interest for this party, and Party President Richard Sulík decried migrants just as much as certain MKP politicians looking to Budapest for inspiration. Thus, theoretically, it would have been possible to find common elements for this pragmatic alliance. In fact, this kind of pragmatic politics is not unusual in Slovakia. Nevertheless, regrettably for the MKP, the alliance could not be forged with the Slovak liberal party, so the MKP, again, remained outside the Parliament.

Interestingly enough, during the last weeks of the campaign, Igor Matovič, one of the daredevils of Slovak politics and the leader of

²¹ The same firm forecast 5% for the MKP as well.

²² Beňová, Zlatica: Prečo sa prieskumy mýlili? *Pravda*. 7 March 2016. 14 – 15.

²³ Coalitions composed of two or three parties are required to attain 7% while the threshold for those with four or more parties is 10%. Earlier (at the end of the 1990s), an even less favourable regulation was in force: an electoral coalition had to obtain as many times 5% as the number of its members. The parties running at the elections have come up with a solution to circumvent that: i.e. instead of forming coalitions, the parties register themselves as a unified party and run with a joint list.

¹⁸ Választási számmisztika. *Újszó*. 7 March 2016. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid, 3.

²⁰ The MKP got 39% in Komarno district while the Most – Híd got only 27%. At the same time, the Hungarian representative of this region, Tibor Bastrnák got into the Bratislava Parliament from the Most – Híd list. Four years ago the Most – Híd was first in Dunajská Streda, but now the number of its supporters shrank from 44% to 33%. See Ben: Maďarský volič je rozdvojený. *Pravda*. 7 March 2016. 15.

the election formation called OLANO – who wanted to replace Fico’s second government, but his own list was not attractive enough for the voters – suggested to hesitant voters that they think pragmatically and at least vote for the SaS or the MKP. For if the latter got into the Parliament, the right-wing opposition would have stood a better chance to replace the government. Interestingly enough, this solution was proposed by Matovič who was not at all amicable with the Hungarian minority when it came to the amendment of the citizenship law.

Conclusion: trends, lessons and dilemmas

The most important lesson of the 2016 elections from the Hungarian perspective is that in the present demographic and legal context, the ethnic Hungarian community of Slovakia is incapable of sending two parties to the Bratislava legislation. This could be suspected before, but now it has been confirmed as a fact that the Slovak electoral basis of the Most – Híd is quite limited, and the MKP can no longer address the entire Hungarian community in Slovakia. This kind of dividedness is starting to become dangerous for the parliamentary representation of Slovakian Hungarians. All the more so as logically, other national parties are also showing an interest in the Hungarian voters, who will sooner or later start looking for a political formation that does not necessarily entail the loss of their ballots. This fear can be further reinforced by the otherwise positive development that the Hungarian card barely played a role at the last two parliamentary elections (2012, 2016). This was not at all the case till 2010 – on the contrary, one of the culmination points of “playing the Hungarian card” was the summer of 2010 concerning the issue of citizenship.

Naturally, we cannot know for sure how long the current peaceful and quiet atmosphere – motivated most likely by the pragmatic solidarity between the two Prime Ministers with a similar character (i.e. Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán) – will last. However, the less ethnic Hungarians feel intimidated in Slovakia (who are otherwise socially well-integrated), the more they can shift towards other parties, especially upon seeing the rivalry between the two parties considered to be Hungarian. And challenges may arrive not only from the traditional Slovak democratic parties. It appears that in recent years, even the extreme right nationalist party called “Kotleba – People’s Party – Our Slovakia” has begun to build out its party structure and recruit members in South Slovakia. Parallel to the intensification of hate-mongering against migrants and to its focus on the Roma, this party has become more restrained with respect to the Hungarian minor-

ity.²⁴ The anti-migrant and anti-Roma slogans of the Kotleba party²⁵ have not fallen on deaf ears in the most Hungarian towns of South Slovakia, either. We cannot be sure whether its supporters come exclusively from the local Slovaks or not. In Subotica, nearly 100 people voted for this party. Otherwise 35% of the ballots were cast in favour of the MKP and 30% in favour of the Most – Híd. According to the information of the Slovakian Hungarian daily *Új Szó*, there were few settlements with a Hungarian population in the district of Nové Zámky in which Kotleba did not receive any votes at all.²⁶

There is another danger threatening the Hungarian parties of Slovakia, a danger that became quite evident during the last elections: their political adversaries or the circles behind them organize concurrent miniature parties to their detriment. Here the main objective is to shake the convictions of the electoral pool of the opponents as well as to decimate and mislead the voters. Although this claim would be hard to prove, the participation of the Hungarian Christian Democratic Alliance (MKDSZ) in the 2016 elections might have been motivated by such considerations. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was indeed a relatively well-organized Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (MKDM) in South Slovakia presided by Béla Bugár, who is currently the head of the Most – Híd, but that was a real party embedded into the Hungarian community. The MKDM joined an election coalition with the Coexistence Movement, and later merged into the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (the old MKP) along with the Slovakian Hungarian liberals. But the MKDSZ does not have much to do with this old ethnic Hungarian Christian democracy. One way or another, the MKDSZ managed to set up a 110-candidate list for the last elections. The leader of the list was Csaba Fehár, a historian from Komarno. Finally, this party collected a mere 2,426 votes at the March elections, finishing with a 0.09% result. Undoubtedly, with such few votes, it did not influence the final outcome of the elec-

²⁴ Szalay, Zoltán: Kotleba bemasírozott a parlamentbe. *Újszó*. 7 March 2016. 4.

²⁵ The name of the party includes the founding party president Marián Kotleba’s name, too. This secondary school IT teacher from Banská Bystrica has been present in the extreme right wing of the Slovakian politics. He was one of the founders and emblematic faces of the Slovak Brotherhood (Slovenská pospolitost’) – resembling the Hungarian Guard –, which organized paramilitary marches. His first major success came at the 2013 district-level elections, when he became the president of the local government of Banská Bystrica district. Despite the fact that in Slovakia relatively few votes are sufficient to elevate someone into a position at the district-level elections (due to the low turnout), it seems that this regional success proved to be an excellent springboard into national politics. At the 2016 parliamentary elections, they carried as many as 209,386 votes, i.e. 8.04%.

²⁶ Gulyás, Zsuzsanna: Kotleba-szavazók Párkányban. *Újszó*. 7 March 2016. 10.

tions because even that would not have made it possible for the MKP to get into the Parliament. Interestingly, this was the third poorest result among the parties which ran in the elections, but did not make it into the Parliament. Only the Democratic Party of Ludo Kaník (with 1,998 votes) and the Coalition – Together for Slovakia got fewer votes (1,777 votes) than the MKDSZ.²⁷ It should be noted that similar “tricks” can be attributed to several other newcomer parties who ran in the 2016 elections either under a vague name (e.g. TIP Party, Chance, Party of the Modern Slovakia) or on the contrary, with quite a telling one (Defiance – Party of Labour, Courage – Big National and Russia-Friendly Coalition, Direct Democracy).

The fact that the Slovakian Hungarian parties still have a reasonable-size party membership – on a Slovakian scale – where they can mobilize their activists may give them some reason for hope. In fact, the problem of operating parliamentary parties without a real membership is becoming worse and worse. The Most – Híd has 5,350 party members while the MKP has a membership base of about 10,000 people. In Slovakia, this ranks them third after the SMER-SD and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH).²⁸ But apparently, not even their registered membership was of much help for the MKP and the KDH.

When examining the realistic position and political weight of the Most – Híd and the MKP, it is advisable to maintain some distance, at least partially, from the national-level election results. For at the last European parliamentary elections in May 2014, both parties did relatively well and each obtained one European mandate out of the 13 mandates granted to Slovakia.²⁹ Interestingly, more ballots were cast in favour of the MKP (6.5%) than of the Most – Híd (5.6%).³⁰ True enough, only 13% of the eligible citizens participated in these elections in Slovakia. With such a low participation rate, Slovakia set an all-time European record.

The MKP performed relatively well at the last municipal elections (November 2014). What is more, the MKP fared better on that occasion than several parliamentary parties. The reason for that is that the width of the base and the number of the activists have more weight on that level. At the same time, it should be noted with

respect to the Slovakian municipal elections that in many cases, they engender the creation of coalitions totally different from the ones on the regional or national level. On the other hand, independent candidates have recently tended to win there – although not all independent candidates are truly independent. This is often only a reaction of the parties to the fact that it has become fashionable among the electorate to turn away from party politicians. Therefore when looking at the results of the two Hungarian and Hungarian-Slovak parties, it is worth taking into consideration those elected mayors and local representatives who ran only in the colours of the MKP. Thus altogether the MKP won 107 mayor seats and 1,151 representative seats in the municipal councils. In contrast, the Most – Híd was granted only 87 mayor seats and 829 representative seats by the voters. Nonetheless, neither of them could obtain the mayor’s position in Komarno and Štúrovo. Both seats were taken by independent candidates.³¹

Whereas the parties in question achieved a better result than several small Slovak parliamentary parties (such as the SaS or the OLANO), it augurs bad for both of them that they underperformed even their 2010 results. In 2010 the Most – Híd carried 273 mayor seats and 3,120 representative seats while the MKP won 159 mayor seats and 1,226 representative seats. True enough, these figures included the results of their candidates running in coalition, too.³²

In 2016 both parties took part in various local small coalitions. It should be stressed that the Most – Híd was able to play a role not only in the South inhabited by Hungarians, but in northern Slovak towns and villages as well. In Bratislava, the Most – Híd and the MKP ran in two different centre-right coalitions for the local mandates. In that case, the “more liberal” coalition incorporating the Most – Híd scored somewhat better (with 14 mandates vs. 11 mandates). Interestingly enough, the local Most – Híd organizations could join in the coalitions formed during the municipal elections in Prešov, Trenčín and Žilina despite their being typically Slovak towns.

Thus, in spite of the negative trends, the position of the MKP is not entirely hopeless on the local level. The party has also started to gain some popularity over the Most – Híd, but that has not appeared in the number of votes yet. Although the MKP has lost fewer voters, the number of the active MKP voters has been very much stagnating. This is what gives the most reason for concern for the party, which should probably re-consider its current policies. On the other hand,

²⁷ Vol’by 2016. *SME*. 7 March 2016, 1.

²⁸ <http://www.hlavnespravdy.sk/najbohatsiu-clensku-zakladnu-si-drzia-smer-sd-kdh-a-smk/665756>

²⁹ In the current term, the MKP is represented by Pál Csáky, while the Most – Híd’s representative is József Nagy, who used to be Minister for the Protection of the Environment of Slovakia.

³⁰ Nevolili sme. *SME*. 26 May 2014, 1.

³¹ VV: SMK predbehla niektoré parlamentné strany. *Pravda*. 18 November 2014, 6.

³² Stupňam, Igor: Vyhrali nezávislí a SMER, pravica počítala straty. *Pravda*. 18 November 2014, 2.

the Most – Híd, which is much more successful than the MKP. is struggling with the same problem. To all appearances, the opening toward the Slovak voters has not really worked out, and the Most – Híd’s effort to become a decisive party within the Slovak centre-right has been only a partial success even though this political space is just about to become vacant. The main question is what effect their current role in the government (i.e. participation in the so-called “old” parties’ coalition) will have on the party’s electoral base. So far it seems that that this engagement has not deterred the minority core of the party, unlike certain metropolitan Slovak voters. But it is also true that Fico’s radical critics had turned away from the Most – Híd, which hit a more moderate tone, already before the elections. The fundamental issue for the party (regarding its long-term persistence) is whether it will manage to carve out a similar position for itself as the one held by the RMDSZ in Romania. The latter’s position is characterized by an openness towards both major blocs. This tactic, however, is significantly hampered by the fact the Most – Híd has a serious minority contender in the form of the MKP.

Minority Culture