

Krzysztof Żarna

**FROM A CONFLICT TO NORMALIZATION? THE
POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT OF VLADIMÍR
MEČIAR AND MIKULAS DZURINDA IN SLOVAKIA
TOWARDS THE REPUBLIC OF HUNGARY
IN 1993–2002**

ABSTRACT

When analyzing the main problems in the bilateral Slovak-Hungarian relations in 1993–2002 it can be concluded that there were many barriers to an agreement in that period of time. Centuries-long Slovak dependence on Hungary increased the nationalistic tendencies among politicians and the Slovak society. Other factors that affected the mutual antipathy were provisions of the Treaty of Trianon, Benes Decrees, situation of Hungarian minority in Slovakia, the dispute over the dam on the Danube and the position of nationalist groups. The worst situation was during the rule of Vladimír Mečiar (1993–1998). This government's actions met with a response from the Hungarian government, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe. The consequence of this policy was the fact that Slovakia was not invited to the summit in Luxembourg (1997) to start negotiations with the EU. Similar situation happened in the context of the entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): while the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary were invited to become member in Madrid in 1997, Slovakia remained as an outsider. Mečiar's regime was also a period of crisis within the Visegrad Group which could have claimed to solve many bilateral issues. It would seem that after the elections in 1998 and the regime change in Slovakia it could come to the normalization of mutual relations. An important prerequisite for doing so was a coalition government, which included the Slovak Hungarians or with the establishment of a mixed commission to solve the most urgent problems. Both countries were forced to work together to achieve

the priority in foreign policy, which was to enter the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. For this purpose, the cooperation within the Visegrad Group was renewed. The question is whether it was this factor that caused the normalization of relations? It seems not. Both countries achieved their primary goal, and this cooperation was necessary. It does not change the fact that also during the Dzurinda government, there have been many frictions no longer directly associated with the activities of the government in Bratislava, but rather with the burden of the past. Another aspect was Viktor Orbán's former government in Hungary and the position of the extreme nationalist political parties.

Keywords: Slovakia, Hungary, the Hungarian minority, the European Union

I PRELIMINARY REMARKS

On 1 January 1993 the Slovak Republic was founded¹. A politician, who dominated the Slovak political scene throughout the nineties was the leader of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (*Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko*, HZDS) – Vladimír Mečiar². With the help from the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská Národná strana*, SNS) coalition and the Association of Slovak Workers (*Združenie robotníkov Slovenska*, ZRS) he pushed through a series of legislative changes aimed at the greatest accumulation of power in his hands. The use of Special Forces in the political struggle, violent attacks on opposition, violation of the freedom of expression and lack of respect for the rights of national and ethnic minorities led the Slovak Republic to isolation in the international arena. The government system in Slovakia in the period up to 1998 was described as “mecziaryzm”³. Timothy Garton

¹ Slovaks do not have a rich tradition of statehood. For nearly one thousand years the Slovak lands were in the Hungarian sphere of influence. In the years of 1918–1939 and 1945–1992 Slovaks formed a common state with Czechs, but the latter played a decisive role. In the years of 1939–1945 the first Slovak Republic existed, but it was a satellite state of the Third Reich.

² Since the inception of the Slovak Republic, Mečiar served as the Prime Minister until 29 October 1998 with a break for Moravčík Joseph's government office (March–December 1994). On Mečiar see: M. Leško, *Mečiar a mečiarismus. Politik bez škrupúl, politika bez zábran*, Bratislava 1998; V. Mečiar, D. Podrečka, L. Šajdova, *Slovenske tabu*, Bratislava 2000; E. Petrášová, *Kto ste, pán Mečiar*, Bratislava 1999.

³ K. Žarna, *Mecziaryzm. Łamanie praw człowieka na Słowacji w latach 1994–1998*, [w:] *Wokół współczesnych problemów ochrony praw człowieka*, red. W. Waclawczyk, Warszawa 2009, pp. 165–183.

Ash describes his government as “demokratura”, searching for an analogy with Franjo Tuđman’s Croatia and even with Slobodan Milošević’s Yugoslavia.⁴ Radosław Zenderowski notes that the international *image* of Slovakia in the early nineties was extremely unfavourable. Slovaks were seen as a nation of claims and disturbance through the prism of Mečiar. The societies of the European countries were convinced, that the ethnic nationalism of Slovaks comes directly from the XIX century⁵.

The purpose of this article is to do a comparative study of Slovak-Hungarian relations in the period of Vladimír Mečiar’s and Mikulas Dzurinda’s regimes. In the coalition of HZDS-SNS-ZRS there has been an escalation of the conflict between Bratislava and Budapest which resulted in exclusion from the first group of countries aspiring to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU)⁶. The situation changed after 1998, when so called broad coalition with Mikuláš Dzurinda as a leader came into power. There was a relative stabilization, which was dictated by pragmatism: both parties wanted a quick entry into Euro-Atlantic Structures.

II VLADIMÍR MEČIAR’S REGIME

The most important issue to resolve, not only in Slovakia but throughout Central Europe, was the situation of the Hungarian minority. In Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria there are still living about 3.5 million people of Hungarian origin. Looking at Slovakia, 14% of its population are representatives of national and ethnic minorities. The most widely represented is the

⁴ T. G. Ash, *Historia na gorąco. Eseje i reportaże z Europy lat 90.*, Kraków 2000, p. 425–431.

⁵ Zenderowski believes that Slovak nationalism was very distant from the violent ideology of a Greater Serbia or Great Croatia. See R. Zenderowski, *Słowacka tożsamość narodowa. Geneza. Proces kształtowania. Kluczowe dylematy*, [w:] *Współczesna Słowacja. Sytuacja wewnętrzna i pozycja międzynarodowa*, ed. E. Pałka, Wrocław 2010, p. 64.

⁶ See P. Bajda, *Polityka zagraniczna Słowacji*, [w:] *Współczesna Słowacja...*, p. 269–274; J. Čurda, P. Zatlakaj, *Cesta Slovenska do NATO. Niektoré aspekty integračného úsilia Slovenska v rokoch 1993–2002*, Bratislava 2003; J. Wojnicki, *Droga Europy Środkowej do Unii Europejskiej (Czechy, Słowacja, Słowenia, Węgry)*, Warszawa 2007; K. Żarna, *Między Wschodem a Zachodem. Słowacja a Sojusz Północnoatlantycki (1993–2004)*, “Polityka i Społeczeństwo” 2010, no 7, p. 212–220; Idem, *Słowacja na drodze do Unii Europejskiej*, “Polityka i Społeczeństwo” 2009, no 6, p. 132–139; Idem, *Wybrane aspekty przystąpienia Republiki Słowackiej do Unii Europejskiej*, “Politeja” 2009, no 11, p. 109–120.

Hungarian minority: 520.528 citizens (approximately 9.7%).⁷ That means that a significant proportion is associated with the provisions of the Peace Treaty of Trianon from 1920. Under the terms of the treaty, the Kingdom of Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and many people of Hungarian nationality found themselves outside of the borders of their homeland⁸.

At the beginning of 1993, in administrative mode, it was ordered to remove the bilingual signs with the names of places. This decision was contrary to the law, which guaranteed their presence in areas inhabited by at least 20% of the members of the minority. The situation of the Hungarians was made worse by introducing a new administrative division – the areas inhabited by them were divided into five regions and joined with the ethnically Slovak areas. As a result, in just one region, the Hungarian minority slightly exceeded 20% of the population⁹.

Another factor that negatively touched the Slovak-Hungarian relations was the Act of 1995 on the official state language¹⁰, which abolished the Act No 428/1990 on the official language in the Slovak Republic¹¹. The Minister of Culture at the time, Ivan Hudec, said that the law so far was more about the use of the languages

⁷ The Census was conducted in 2001. See O. Dostal, *Národnostné menšiny*, [w:] *Slovensko 2001. Suhrnna správa o stave spoločnosti*, ed. M. Kollar, G. Mesežnikov, Bratislava 2001, p. 169–170; G. Janusz, *Ochrona praw mniejszości narodowych w Europie*, , Lublin 2011, p. 138–142.

⁸ On the subject of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia see, among others, W. Eder, *Polityka Republiki Słowackiej wobec węgierskiej mniejszości narodowej a Unia Europejska i NATO*, “Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa” 1998, z. 12–13, p. 155–166; *Maďari na Slovensku (1989–2004). Súhrnná správa. Od zmeny režimu po stup do Európskej únie*, red. J. Fazekas, P. Hunčík, Šamorin 2008; *Maďarská menšina na Slovensku v procesoch transformácie po roku 1989 (Historické, politologické a prane súvislosti)*, ed. J. Šutajová, M. Ďurková, Prešov 2007; *Národ a národnosti na Slovensku v transformujúcej sa spoločnosti – vzťahy a konflikty*, ed. Š. Šutaj, Prešov 2005; E. Pałka, *Problematyka mniejszości narodowych na Słowacji*, [w:] *Współczesna Słowacja...*, p. 211–234; P. Sula, *Mniejszość węgierska w stosunkach słowacko-węgierskich po 1989 roku*, [w:] *Współczesna Słowacja...*, p. 279–289; S. Wojciechowski, *Problem mniejszości węgierskiej w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, “Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa” 2001 z. 18, p. 67–79; R. Zawistowska, *Kwestia węgierskiej mniejszości narodowej w Słowacji w latach 1945–1948*, Warszawa 2009; K. Żarna, *Kwestia mniejszości węgierskiej w stosunkach słowacko-węgierskich 1993–2006*, “Prace Komisji Środkowoeuropejskiej Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności” 2010, t. XVIII, s. 159–171; Idem, *Słowacy i Węgrzy we współczesnej Europie. Bariery i możliwości pojednania*, “Limes. Studia i materiały z dziejów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej” 2009, no 2, p. 197–212; *Środkowoeuropejski pat? Węgry w polityce zagranicznej Republiki Słowackiej (1998–2006)*, “Polityka i Społeczeństwo” 2011, no 8, p. 350–358.

⁹ W. Eder, op.cit., p. 157.

¹⁰ *Zákon Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky o štátnom jazyku Slovenskej republiky*, Z.z 1995, č. 89.

¹¹ *Zákon Slovenskej národnej rady o úradnom jazyku v Slovenskej republike*, Z.z 1990, č. 428.

of minorities¹². For citizens of nationalities other than Slovak there was a clear barrier in using their mother tongue. The Constitutional Court decided that one of the articles says that it is unconstitutional that an official letter directed to the State by a member of a national minority group must be written in Slovak¹³. Despite this appeal, Mečiar's government has taken steps towards revising the existing law. Some government officials claimed that the existing regulation concerning the use of minority languages is sufficient for Slovakia to be able to sign the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages¹⁴. After the law came into force, people belonging to Hungarian minorities protested and the Hungarian Prime Minister, Gyula Horn, warned the Slovak Republic of a possibility that the diplomatic relations could get worse. The law project has long been criticized by leaders of the Hungarians in Slovakia and Budapest. According to Horn, the law was contradictory in few places to the signed by Bratislava Slovak-Hungarian Treaty of friendship and the European Convention on Human Rights. The leading Hungarian politicians announced to intervene in the issue of Slovak Act to the Council of Europe¹⁵.

In 1995, the decision of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic was changed to a less advantageous form of state aid for the development of culture of national minorities¹⁶. Grants for Hungarian cultural institutions have been reduced by half compared to 1994. The effect of these actions was that some of these institutions ceased to exist, while others were forced to reduce the number of employ-

¹² A.J. Madera, *Na drodze do niepodległości. Słowacki system polityczny w okresie transformacji*, Rzeszów 2001, p. 257.

¹³ The Constitution of the Slovak Republic, adopted in September 1992, contains provisions that are aimed at regulating the fundamental rights of national minorities in Slovakia. According to Article 6, the Slovak language is the official State language and the use of minority languages in official contacts will be subject to further regulations. Article 33 states that the membership of any national or ethnic minority cannot bring discredit to anyone. It is not allowed to discriminate against anyone because of their origin. Article 34 lists the directory of minority rights. Under the first paragraph, the citizens forming national or ethnic minorities are guaranteed all-round development, particularly the right to develop their own culture together with other members of minorities or groups, the right to disseminate and receive information in their native language, organize themselves in national societies, establish and maintain educational and cultural institutions. Then, the legislature guaranteed minorities the right to receive education in their native language, use it in official contacts, the right to participate in solving problems of national minorities and ethnic groups. See *Ústava Slovenskej republiky 1992*, Bratislava 2002.

¹⁴ A.J. Madera, op.cit., p. 257–258.

¹⁵ T. Mačkowiak, *Tylko po słowacku*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 1995, no 270, p. 8.

¹⁶ O. Dostal, *Narodnostne menšiny [w:] Slovensko 2000. Suhrnna sprava o stave spoločnosti*, ed. M. Kollar, G. Mesežnikov, Bratislava 2000, p. 180; A.J. Madera, op.cit., p. 260.

ees. Of the dozen or so of Hungarian-speaking publications, not one was receiving funds from the state in 1995.¹⁷ The Mečiar's government also supported financially inserts added to the nationally released newspapers, which were addressed to people belonging to national minorities, developed in their national languages. However, the Hungarian minority newspaper "Új SZO" has not received money for this purpose, while a considerable amount went into bank accounts of pro-government newspapers, with a typically nationalist orientation, such as "Slovenska Republic" or "Hlas people". In 1995 they were given respectively 8.7 million and 6 million Slovak Koruna¹⁸. This way, there was the paradoxical situation where the inserts appeared in the newspapers, called the ethnic theme, in which the Slovak Hungarians could find hostile articles translated into Hungarian. It was a clear support for the pro-government press, which flowed from the pockets of taxpayers.

On 19 March 1995, in the Matignon Palace in Paris the bilateral Slovak-Hungarian Treaty on good neighbourliness and friendly cooperation was signed.¹⁹ From Hungarian initiative, the treaty included the recommendation of the Council of Europe no 1201²⁰ concerning national minorities. Both countries confirmed the inviolability of their borders. Hungarian Parliament ratified it in June 1995 and Slovakian in March 1996. The method and the accompanying atmosphere of its implementation left much to be desired. During the ratification at the National Council of the Slovak Republic, unfavourable factors could be noticed. On the other hand, the Hungarian political elite demonstrated to the West, that the question of Slovak membership in NATO and the EU should not be resolved with any doubts because of the unsolved problems²¹.

Serious concerns of the Hungarians in Slovakia and the Hungarian government provoked the amendments to the Criminal Code called the Protection Act of the Republic, which exacerbated the penalty (among others, imprisonment for five years) for organizing groups threatening the security, sovereignty or state consti-

¹⁷ R. Chmel, D. Slobodnik, *Czemu Słowacy nie mogą się zrozumieć*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 1995, no 186, p. 8; O. Dostal, *Wspólny problem*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 1996, no 179, p. 12.

¹⁸ A.J. Madera, op.cit., p.260–261; A. Lovász, *Maďarská tlač, [w:] Maďari na Slovensku...*, p. 164.

¹⁹ *Zmluva o dobrom susedstve a priateľskej spolupráci medzi Slovenskou republikou a Maďarskou republikou*, Z. z. 1997, č. 115.

²⁰ *Recommendation 1201 (1993) on an additional protocol on the rights of national minorities to the European Convention on Human Rights*, <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta93/ EREC1201.htm>, read 13.05.2011.

²¹ M. Herman, *Słowacja między Wschodem i Zachodem*, "Przegląd Zachodni" 2000, no 4, p. 160.

tutional regime. There were also heavy penalties for spreading false information about Slovakia abroad. This led to a situation where virtually anyone who spoke negatively about the government in foreign media, or organized a meeting where they discussed the problem of discrimination against minorities in Slovakia, could be sentenced to imprisonment²². At the end, the amendments were rejected by parliament in February 1997.

The law on national symbols has been amended. According to that law, playing a national anthem of a foreign country on Slovakia's territory would be punished, except when official diplomatic visits would take a place. This amendment caused protests of representatives of national minorities²³.

Conflicts between the Slovak government and the Hungarian minority has exacerbated even more in June 1997 as a result of the so-called boycott certificates. Several thousand of students of Hungarian origin who attended Slovakian schools with Hungarian as the language of instruction, refused to accept their certificates. This was due to an earlier decree of the Ministry of Education to replace the existing bilingual certificates with certificates in Slovak only²⁴. During the Prime Ministers Mečiar and Horn meeting in Piestany in November 1997, it was decided that an intergovernmental committee will resume activity on the review of implementation of the Basic Treaty from March 1995, within its framework two subcommittees will be set up: one to review the issues of the national minorities and one to examine the legislation of the Slovak language²⁵.

World public opinion was shocked with Mečiar's government policy. Violations of minority rights in Slovakia were publicized by a functioning Hungarian diplomacy. The issue of the Slovak Hungarians was repeatedly raised in the Council of Europe, CSCE / OSCE and the EU. The anti-democratic turn in Slovakia caused them losing their place in the first group of countries invited to join NATO and the EU. In addition, Slovakia has been condemned in the European Parliament Resolution, which stated that the Slovak Republic is building a new "iron curtain" in Europe. The Mečiar's government rejected that resolution, recognizing it as

²² W. Eder, op.cit., p. 158.

²³ *Zákon Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky č. 63/1993 Z. z. o štátnych symboloch Slovenskej republiky a ich používaní v znení zákona Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky č. 240/1994 Z. z.*, Z.z. 1996, č. 273.

²⁴ *Europa Środkowa – czas przełomu*, [w:] *Rocznik strategiczny 1997/1998. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej w środowisku międzynarodowym Polski*, ed. R. Kuźniar, Warszawa 1998, p. 170

²⁵ K. Żarna, *Kwestia mniejszości...*, p. 165.

interference in home affairs of the state and declaring that no one can take away from Slovakia the right to recognize their own language as national. The visit of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Slovakia in 1996 did not bring any positive results. Mečiar's nationalist government continued its policy of ignoring the growing isolation in the international arena²⁶.

A very serious and not anticipated conflict happened at a meeting of Prime Ministers, even though more positive breakthrough was expected. It was preceded by a meeting of Foreign Ministers in Komarno, during which both sides expressed satisfaction with the economic, military, home affairs and justice areas. However, there were no specific conclusions on the Hungarian minority. Horn gave Mečiarowi a memorandum with a list of issues which required, according to the Hungarian side, solutions: determining the composition of the intergovernmental committee on control of the rights of minorities, or rebuilding a bridge between the Slovak Štúrovo and Hungarian Esztergom. The conflict regarding the committee was the fact that the Slovak party wanted to designate a Hungarian person from the 'promecziarowska' organization, and Hungary opted for a representative of the Hungarian government. In response, the Slovakian Prime Minister offered Slovak and Hungarian minorities in both countries, resettlement to their home lands, if they wish to do so²⁷. This caused outrage in Hungary and among Hungarians in Slovakia. Hungary launched a protest campaign at international forums, which Bratislava recognized as anti Slovakian action. Consequently, this led to a further cooling of relations and the cancellation of the Foreign Ministers meeting.

III PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND THE APPOINTMENT OF MIKULÁŠ DZURINDA'S GOVERNMENT

The issue of bilateral relations with Hungary played an important role during the campaign before the parliamentary elections in 1998. The representatives of the ruling coalition party, the Movement for Democratic Slovakia, believed that building a relationship with neighbouring countries should be based on the principles of sovereignty in order to build stability in Central Europe. Slovak National Party pointed out that relations with Hungary are strained. They believed that the main reason was the attitude of the representatives of the Hungarian minority

²⁶ M. Herman, *op.cit.*, p. 161.

²⁷ R. Łoś, *Polityka zagraniczna Słowacji*, Łódź 2007, p. 106.

living in southern areas of Slovakia, and the activities of some political parties which could endanger the safety of the Slovak Republic. SNS emphasized the need to respect the sovereignty and independence of states²⁸.

Slovak Democratic Coalition (*Slovenská demokratická koalícia*, SDK) pointed out that in recent years there has been a sharp deterioration in relations with neighbours, especially with the Czech Republic and Hungary. The representatives of the SDK looked for the source in the nationalistic tendencies and a lack of desire for the agreement. Party of Civic Alliance (*Strana občianskeho porozumienia*, SOP) pointed to the need of improvement of neighbourly relations, in order to achieve the fundamental objective which should be the admission of Slovakia to the Euro-Atlantic Structures. The Democratic Party Left Wing (*Strana demokratickej ľavice*, SDL) eliminated any contentious issues and became the historical cause for reconciliation of the Slovak and Hungarian. For obvious reasons, the most emphasis on the normalization of Slovak-Hungarian relations appeared in the Hungarian Coalition Party²⁹ (*Magyar Koalíció Pártja – Strana maďarskej koalície*, SMK). Their representatives believed that the vital interest of the Hungarians in Slovakia is to have the best relations between Slovakia and the Republic of Hungary. Everyone is convinced that the key to good relations lies in the hands of the Slovak Government. SMK will support any initiative between the two countries, which will create the best possible environment for cooperation between citizens, politicians, institutions and economic, cultural and government organizations³⁰.

In 1998 the elections for the National Council of Slovak Republic were held, which brought back the success of HZDS. There were five more parties in the parliament: SDK, SDL, SMK, SNS, and SOP. When HZDS was unable to create a coalition, the 'antimečiarowski' parties formed so called 'broad coalition' (SDK, SDL, SMK and SOP), which held 93 votes in the National Council. Mikuláš Dzurinda became the leader of the Cabinet³¹.

²⁸ M. Wlachovský, *Zahraničná politika*, [w:] *Volby 1998, Analýza volebných programom politických strán a hnutí*, ed. G. Mesežnikov, Bratislava 1998, pp. 68–70.

²⁹ The formation of the Hungarian Coalition Party was a result of collaboration between several groups and Unification Congress on 21 June 1998: Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (*Magyar Kereszténydemokrata Mozgalom – Maďarské kresťanskodemokratické hnutie*, MKDH), Co-existence Political Movement (*Politikai Mozgalom Együttélés – Politické Hnutie Spolužitie*, PHS) and the Hungarian Civil Party (*Magyar Polgári Párt – Maďarská občianska strana*, MOS).

³⁰ M. Wlachovský, op.cit., pp. 68–70.

³¹ G. Mesežnikov, *Vnútropolitický vývoj a systém politických strán*, [in:] *Slovensko 1998/1999. Suhrnna sprava o stave spoločnosti*, ed. M. Kollar, G. Mesežnikov, Bratislava 1999, p. 24–26.

Tab. 2. Number of seats in the National Council of the Slovak Republic after the elections in 1998

Party	Number of seats
Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	43
Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK)	42
Party of Democratic Left Wing (SDL)	23
Parties of Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	15
Slovak National Party (SNS)	14
Party of Civic Alliance (SOP)	13
Total	150

Source: V. Krivý, *Výsledky volieb v rokoch 1998 a 1999* [w:] *Slovensko 1998/1999. Suhrnna správa o stave spoločnosti*, ed. M. Kollar, G. Mesežnikov, Bratislava 1999, p. 115–126.

IV SLOVAK-HUNGARIAN RELATIONS IN 1998–2002

The new Prime Minister was aware of the fact that the improvement of the fate of Hungarians in Slovakia is necessary in order to improve the image of Slovakia in the international arena. Slovakia could break international isolation only by ensuring that the rights of people belonging to national and ethnic minorities. An important gesture towards normalization of Slovak-Hungarian relations was the establishment of the government coalition which included representatives of the Slovak Hungarians. In the new government, a representative of the minority became a Deputy Prime Minister on Human Rights, National Minorities and Regional Development (Pál Csáky). Ministerial portfolios also received István Harna and László Miklós.³² On the one hand, it was a friendly gesture in the direction of Budapest; on the other hand, however, it can be argued that Slovak Hungarians were indispensable for Dzurinda to carry out the entire reform package.

In autumn of 1998, a new stage in Slovak-Hungarian relations began, which was a manifestation of the Foreign Ministers of both countries at the November meeting in Rome (on the occasion of a session of the Western European Union). It was found that existing bilateral problems will not affect political relations, and will be transferred to the expert level. Moreover, they signed a protocol on setting up the

³² Ibidem, p. 25.

committee designed to oversee the implementation of the Basic Agreement of the 1995. These initiatives have already appeared before; however, they ultimately failed to realize them at the time. Slovakia and Hungary have agreed to create a bilateral working group to prepare together the PHARE programme. During Dzurinda's leadership, the unconstitutional Acts detrimental to the rights of national minorities were abolished. As already mentioned, the constitution guaranteed their right to develop their own culture, to promote and receive information in their native language, the establishment of societies and educational institutions. The school certificate conflict has been resolved, and in July 1999 the Slovak parliament adopted a law on minority languages, which guaranteed the right to use the native language in communities where at least 20% of people are members of minorities. Under the Act, the minorities could use their own language in communicating in offices, issuing documents and conducting deliberations in the municipal council³³. The law was met with varying degrees of acceptance among the Hungarians in Slovakia. On one hand, they welcomed the statutory guarantee of the language rights, on the other hand, Hungarians called for lowering the threshold to 10%, which would allow benefiting from the rights in more municipalities³⁴.

Another factor, which was a sign of warming relations, was that Hungarian supported for Slovakia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU. During his visit in Bratislava, on 16 February 1999, the Prime Minister Viktor Orban said that Hungary is committed to assist in this regard, both in bilateral and multilateral level. It was also decided, among others, to rebuild the destroyed during the Second World War bridge on the Danube, connecting the Slovak Štúrovo and Hungarian Esztergom, which symbolized reconciliation of the two countries.³⁵ This visit was considered as an important gesture, and beginning of a new relationship phase between representatives of both countries.

The dispute around the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros energy complex remained open, and the solution was to be decided in the International Court of Justice in The Hague. The procedure began in March 1997. This was despite the declara-

³³ *Zákon Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky o používaní jazykov národnostných menšín*, Z.z. 1999, č. 184.

³⁴ *Europa Środkowa – dziesięć lat później*, [in:] *Rocznik strategiczny 1999/2000 Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej w środowisku międzynarodowym Polski*, ed. R. Kuźniar, Warszawa 2000, p. 234.

³⁵ *Europa Środkowa*, [in:] *Rocznik strategiczny 1998/1999. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej w środowisku międzynarodowym Polski*, ed. R. Kuźniar, Warszawa 1999, p. 188; K. Żarna, *Słowacy i Węgrzy...*, p. 207.

tions of both parties that they strive to reach an amicable settlement. On 26 September the Court gave the verdict. It condemned Hungary for breaking the 1977 agreement, which was considered valid, while Slovakia was found guilty of shifting the Danube. It was recommended that both compensate each other for unilateral actions and start talks in order to fully perform the contract. The talks were launched in the autumn lasting until mid-February 1998. Despite the fears of not reaching the agreement because of the political reasons, such as starting the campaign in both states, it was reached before the deadline set by the Court³⁶. This allowed thinking that both sides broke the impasse; however, in the meantime the campaign conducted in both countries, exacerbated relations again. Especially the members of the SNS constantly raised the argument about the Hungarian threat and were striving to take control of Slovakia's southern territory³⁷.

The President Edvard Benes Decrees, which were the basis, among others, for the resettlement of German, Austrian and Hungarian population from the territory of Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, was the problem from the past. It negatively affected the relationship between Czech and Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary as well as influenced the Visegrad Cooperation. On 20 February 2002, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban stated that he cannot imagine a situation where a country that preserves this type of law in its legal system would be accepted into the EU³⁸. Orban tried to convince the international public opinion that the Benes Decrees was not only a Czech-German or Slovak-Hungarian problem, but it was a European one³⁹. A contrary opinion was represented by the opposition in Hungary; whose representatives felt that it the position represented by Orban may adversely affect the process of integration of Central and Eastern Europe with the EU.

The matter that worsen, at least for some time, relations between Budapest and their neighbours, was the law concerning Hungarian people living in neighbouring countries: Hungarian card (adopted on 19 June 2001, in force since 1 January

³⁶ *Europa Środkowa – czas przełomu...*, pp. 170–171; K. Żarna, *Główne kierunki polityki zagranicznej Republiki Słowackiej rządu Mikulaša Dzurindy w latach 1998–2002*, “Bielsko-Bialskie Studia Europejskie” 2008, no 2 (6), p. 68.

³⁷ *Europa Środkowa – czas przełomu...*, pp. 170–171.

³⁸ P. Mosný, Olejník M., Šutaj Š., *Prezidentské dekrety Edwarda Beneša v povojnovom Slovensku*, Bratislava 2002, passim.

³⁹ T. Olszański, *Węgry wokół Węgrów*, “Polityka” 2002, no 11, p. 45.

2002)⁴⁰. It was a card for Hungarian people living in Romania, Yugoslavia, Slovenia, Croatia and Slovakia and Ukraine, and it was giving them social, occupational, educational and cultural privileges. For example, after obtaining a certificate of membership of the Hungarian nation, a person was entitled to work legally in Hungary for three months, study at Hungarian universities for free, use the Hungarian health care for free, education grants for children in local schools with Hungarian language. The Hungarian minority in Austria was not included in the operation of the Act, since it was announced that the state would not tolerate any positive discrimination of its citizens and the privileges provided in the Hungarian law are considered as such. The initiative of this Act and its adoption (also with the opposition votes) was clearly explained on grounds of the pre-election year, as the question how to best care for the diaspora was an important element of Hungarian politics. The law, even during its preparation, sparked criticism abroad, mainly in Romania and Slovakia. Politicians from both countries acknowledged the law that is not only contrary to the applicable bilateral treaties with Hungary, but also intervening in the internal legal order. However, these countries have used it differently. Romania concluded agreement with Hungary in late December 2001, which, among others, extended permission for seasonal work in Hungary for all its citizens. Slovakia took a more principled position, considering the Hungarian law as interference in internal affairs, as incompatible with the Treaty of Friendship from 1995 and in contravention of international law, which made it practically impossible to work out a compromise⁴¹.

In February 2002, the Slovak parliament adopted the content of that resolution and the Prime Minister Dzurinda reiterated his country's position during his visit to Budapest in November 2002. It was a surprise for the Hungarian side, which was expecting that after the political changes in both countries it was possible to achieve a compromise, like the Romanian-Hungarian agreement. Slovakia also received indirect support from the European Commission for its position, and in its reports from years 2001–2002 addressed the Hungarian Card. In November, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Gunther Verheugen has sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Hungary, where he alleged that the Hungarian Card was

⁴⁰ *Zákon o Maďaroch žijúcich v susedných štátoch 62/2001*, http://www.mfa.gov.hu/NR/rdonlyres/84893CF5-E867-4DEF-BA59-1C70DDE5A91F/0/Statusz_SLO.pdf, read 02.05.2011.

⁴¹ *Europa Środkowa 2001/2002*, [w:] *Rocznik strategiczny 2001/2002. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej w środowisku międzynarodowym Polski*, ed. R. Kuźniar, Warszawa 2002, p. 274–275; T. Grabiński, *Dobrze Węgrem być*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 2002, no 24, p. 8; P. Morvay, *Połączenie na Kartę*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 2002, no 26, pp. 12–13.

offering many privileges for Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries, extraterritoriality and discrimination against non Hungarian people⁴².

Hungarian card has also become the object of analysis for the Council of Europe and in fact the European Commission for Democracy through Law and Parliamentary Assembly, which sought to identify the standards and conditions for the implementation of legislation to support national minorities abroad⁴³. Also, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has taken its position on the Hungarian Card. The OSCE Minorities Commissioner issued, on 26 October 2001, a statement that the protection of minority rights is the responsibility of the state in which the minority lives. He also suggested that any attempts made and recorded in the past by individual states seeking to protect the minority, which is in the jurisdiction of another state, led to tensions and international conflicts⁴⁴.

V CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article outlines the main problems in the bilateral Slovak-Hungarian relations in years 1993–2002. There were many barriers in the process to the agreement in that period. Long-term dependence of Slovaks on Hungary increased the nationalistic tendencies among politicians and the Slovak society. Other factors that have determined the mutual antipathy were: the provisions of the Treaty of Trianon, Benes Decrees, the situation of Hungarian minority in Slovakia, the dispute over the dam on the Danube, and the position of nationalist groups. The worst situation was during the rule of Vladimír Mečiar (1993–1998). During those years, there were a number of legislative changes. Trials to make amendments to the Criminal Code, the law on national symbols, the law on state language, have all contributed to the worsening position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. In addition, the Slovak government, having carried out the administrative reform, clearly aimed at weakening the position of Hungarians in Slovakia. All these measures have met with a response from the Hungarian government and the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe. The consequence of this policy was the fact that Slovakia

⁴² *Europa Środkowa – rok przełomu*, [w:] *Rocznik strategiczny 2002/2003. Przegląd sytuacji politycznej, gospodarczej i wojskowej w środowisku międzynarodowym Polski*, ed. R. Kuźniar, Warszawa 2003, p. 250.

⁴³ P. Sula, *op.cit.*, p. 288.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

was not invited to the summit in Luxembourg (1997) to start negotiations regarding the membership in the EU. Similar situation was in the context of entry to NATO: while the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary were invited to be members in Madrid in 1997, Slovakia remained on the margins. Mečiar's regime was also a period of crisis within the courtiers of the Visegrad Group which could claim to solve many problems bilaterally.

It would seem that after the elections in 1998 and the regime change in Slovakia, the mutual relations would come to normalization. An important prerequisite for doing so was a coalition government, which also included the Slovak Hungarians, or the establishment of the mixed committee planned to address the most urgent problems. Both countries were forced to work together to achieve the priorities in their foreign policy, which was to enter the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. For this purpose, they renewed cooperation within the Visegrad Group. The question is whether it was this factor which caused the normalization of relations? It seems not. Both countries achieved their primary goal, and this cooperation was necessary.

It does not change the fact that even during the Dzurinda' regime, there were many frictions which were no longer directly associated with the activities of the government in Bratislava, but rather with the burden of the past. Another aspect was the former Hungarian government of Viktor Orban and the position of the extreme nationalist political parties.