

FROM MINORITY STATUS TO PARTNERSHIP

*Hungarians in Czechoslovakia / Slovakia
1918-1992*

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HUNGARIANS
IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA / SLOVAKIA
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(1993)



**AN ANALYSIS BY THE
POLITICAL MOVEMENT
COEXISTENCE
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INTRODUCTION

History will be the judge of Czechoslovakia's 74 years of existence. We can already affirm, however, that the past 74 years have represented a period of continuous legal discrimination, material and spiritual damage, physical trial and psychological suffering for those Hungarians whose native land was ceded to Czechoslovakia in 1920.

An increasing number of politicians and political scientists realize that in Eastern and Central Europe, the majority of conflicts, the slow pace of democratization and social development, and the increase of nationalist totalitarianism in the wake of communism are rooted in the post-World War I peace settlement. The effects of the above-mentioned problems extend beyond the region to Western Europe.

While the peace treaties claimed to be based on the principle of self-determination, they demonstrated an unjust application of the right to self-determination. Certain nations were denied the opportunity to exercise this basic right. Consequently, large parts of certain nations -- such as the Hungarians -- were forced to become national minorities, whereas others -- such as the Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians and Serbs -- could extend their rule over territories much larger than could be justified by either the right to self-determination or

the size of the land they inhabit.

The historical account of those Hungarians who were annexed to the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia illustrates that human rights violations, as well as persecution, oppression and degradation to second-class citizen status has created an intolerable situation for the national minority populations. A lasting institutional solution can only be found within the framework of European democratization.

The division of Czechoslovakia and the creation of an independent Slovak state presents a unique opportunity for the elimination of minority oppression, the guarantee of *de jure* and *de facto* equality of all citizens and the creation of stability in Central Europe. These objectives can be pursued only if the principle of civic equality and the concept of mutually limited self-determination of national (ethnic) communities are realized. It also requires that national and ethnic communities establish new partnership relations.

The following four chapters include a brief review of the history and present status of the Hungarian national minority community in Slovakia as well as proposals for the solution to the problem.

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I. THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS (1918-1948)

Minority Status for Hungarians

Hungarians became a national minority in Czechoslovakia in 1918, when a strip of northern Hungarian territory was ceded to the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia without the consent of the inhabitants of that region. The new multi-ethnic state of Czechoslovakia was created from parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its establishment was justified through the right to self-determination of a fictitious "Czechoslovak" nation. Based on Austrian and Hungarian census figures of 1910, the population of Czechoslovakia was 13.5 million. In addition to 6.3 million Czechs, the population included 3.5 million Germans, almost 2 million Slovaks, more than 1

million Hungarians, 0.5 million Ruthenians, 200,000 Jews and 100,000 Poles. By 1938, the proportion of the various nationalities changed slightly in favour of the "Czechoslovaks" (see *Map 2* and *Figures 1* and *2*).

The First Ethnic Cleansing

Due to the loss of livelihood of Hungarian intellectuals and state officials, by the end of December 1920 approximately 105,000 Hungarians were forced to leave Czechoslovakia. Most fled to Hungary. Close to 45,000 Hungarians were denied Czechoslovakian citizenship, and many thousands were forced to move away from their place of residence to other parts of Czechoslovakia. As a

result, between 1921 and 1930 the Hungarian national minority population decreased by 76,000 and completely disappeared in approximately 200 towns where Hungarians had lived since the Middle Ages (see *Map 3* and *4*).

Violation of Minority Rights

Czechoslovakia promised to respect the rights of its ethnic and national minorities in the 1919 Peace Treaty signed in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The Czechoslovak government, however, did not respect these rights. It failed to secure equal rights for national minority communities and did nothing to halt attempts at their assimilation. Discriminatory practices were particularly common in education, language use and government employment. In the period between 1922 and 1938, the Czechoslovak state settled Czech and Slovak populations in what had been ethnically homogeneous Hungarian regions. As a result of land reform policies of the government, land belonging primarily to Hungarians was seized and redistributed among Czech and Slovak settlers. More than seventy such settlements were established in this period. Members of historical Hungarian communities were forced into numerical minority and subsequently were degraded to second-class citizens.

Return of the Hungarian-Inhabited Areas to Hungary

British politicians and the League of Nations began to express an interest in the situation of the Hungarian national minority communities in the late 1920s. Nazi Germany took advantage of the dissatisfactions of the German minorities and brought about the Munich Agreement which was signed by Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany. According to this agreement, the Sudeten German areas of Czechoslovakia were ceded to Germany. Subsequently, Czechoslovakia offered to return 11,300 square kilometres of territory to Hungary. In November 1938, the Vienna Arbitral Court increased the award by 800 square kilometres. The areas returned to Hungary included 752,000 Hungarians, 86.5 percent of the total population.

World War II

During the Second World War, Slovakia -- an independent state between 1939 and 1945 -- had a significant Hungarian population of approximately 70,000. The rights accorded to this population were minimal. There was one Hungarian deputy in the Slovak parliament, *Mr. János Esterházy*, the only one to vote against the deportation of Slovakian Jews in 1942. Esterházy was first condemned to death, then condemned to life imprisonment for his vote in 1945.

He died in prison in 1957.

Complete Loss of Rights by the Hungarian Minority

At the end of World War II, the areas returned to Hungary in 1938 were reabsorbed into Czechoslovakia. At this time, government circles in Czechoslovakia held (German and Hungarian minorities that is, its non-Slavic inhabitants) responsible for dismemberment of the country. As a result, the Hungarian national minority community was declared to be collectively guilty in the Government Programme announced at Kassa (Kosice) on April 4, 1945, and Hungarians lost their civil rights. These rights affected their national identity and civil status as follows:

- Presidential Ordinance 1945/33 deprived Hungarians of their citizenship;
- Act 1946/83 deprived them of their right to be employed by government agencies;
- They lost their rights to a retirement pension;
- Their property (real estate) was confiscated (pres. ordinance 1945/108)
- Decree 1944/6 of the Slovak National Assembly (Parliament) abolished Hungarian schools, Act 1945/81 prohibited Hungarian educational institutions, and Hungarians past the age of obligatory schooling were not allowed to continue their education at all;
- A government decision taken in June 1946 (effective July 17 1946) forced 327,000 Hungarians to renounce their Hungarian national identity ("re-Slovakization")(Figure 1 and 2);
- Presidential Decree 1945/88 sentenced several tens of thousands of Hungarians to forced labour;
- As a result of Presidential Decree 1945/137 many, Hungarians were taken into custody for being politically unreliable.

The Second Ethnic Cleansing

In addition to losing their civil rights, approximately 180,000 Hungarians were deported from their place of birth:

- In the winter of 1944-45 approximately 50,000 Hungarian civilians were deported for forced labour to the Soviet Union, half of them died before their release;
- 36,000 Hungarians were deported during the summer of 1945;
- 75,000 Hungarians were expelled to Hungary as part of a forced population exchange between 1947-49;
- More tens of thousands Hungarians were held prisoners in concentration camps;
- By a forced exchange of inhabitants, 76,000

- Hungarians were settled to Hungary against their will;
- Between 1946-47, approximately 45,000 Hungarians were settled in various parts of Czechoslovakia, many hundreds of kilometres

- from the place of their birth;
- Approximately 30,000 Hungarians fled abroad from persecution between 1945-49.

II. THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY COMMUNITY UNDER COMMUNIST RULE (1948-1989)

After the communist takeover in February 1948, the Czechoslovak state continued to deprive members of the Hungarian community of their civil rights, though in a more subtle manner. Some Hungarian-language schools were returned to the community, and Hungarians were again permitted to establish a cultural organization (under communist administration). The government also permitted the publication of Hungarian-language (communist) newspapers. These liberties, however, did not include a complete return to social equality. The one-party, totalitarian state apparatus continued its attempts to assimilate the Hungarian community by destroying both their social structure and the ethnic character of Hungarian-inhabited areas. Organized resettlement of large numbers of ethnic Slovaks also contributed to the gradual assimilation of the Hungarian community.

At the time of the Prague Spring in 1968 the Hungarian national minority community took advantage of the weakening one-party rule. In addition to supporting pro-democratic forces, it was active in the struggle for legal codification of the rights of national minorities. As a result, Constitutional Law No. 1968/144 affirmed the rights

of minorities. Subsequent to Soviet occupation, however, the government rapidly returned to its anti-minority and anti-Hungarian policies. The legislation required to implement the principles contained in the Constitution was not adopted. The activity of the sole Hungarian cultural institution, CSEMADOK, was further restricted, the activity of the Hungarian Youth Union established in 1968 was suppressed, and 200 Hungarian-language schools were abolished during the twenty years of "normalization". The use of Hungarian in official business, authorized in the early 1950s by the Communist government, was henceforth prohibited.

The Committee for the Protection of the Rights of the Hungarian Minority in Czechoslovakia was founded in 1978 to fight political and ethnic oppression. This committee, forced to function underground, focused primarily on the protection of the Hungarian-language school network. Its spokesman *Miklós Duray*, a signatory of Charter 77, was jailed twice for his activities in the Committee. Between 1988-89, hundreds of Hungarian intellectuals protested this national and political oppression.

III. THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY COMMUNITY AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM

1. Demographics

According to 1991 census data 567,290 Slovakian citizens (10.8 percent of the total population) identify themselves as members of the Hungarian national minority community. At the same time, 608,221 people (11.5 percent of the population) declare

Hungarian as their native language. (The total population of Slovakia is 5,274,335, of which 85.6 percent consider themselves of "Slovakian nationality" and 84.3 percent declare Slovak to be their native language. The further non-Slovak

population consists of 190,000 of which there are 80,000 Romanians, 53,000 Czechs and 30,000 Ukrainians and Ruthenians). In addition, 20,000 Hungarians inhabit the Czech Republic. Various

Hungarian sources estimate the total number of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia to be 700,000-750,000 (see Map 5).

2. Geographic Distribution of the Hungarian Population

The region settled by Hungarians constitutes a continuous, 345 mile-long strip in southern Slovakia along the Slovak-Hungarian border. Its area is approximately 3,516 square miles. Over ninety-two percent (92.2 percent) of the Hungarian national minority community in Slovakia lives in this region where they constitute 61.7 percent of the population. In the Hungarian-speaking areas the proportion of Hungarian speakers exceeds 10 percent in 523 townships. This proportion exceeds 50 percent in 435 of these townships. There are 27 additional townships with a significant Hungarian population under 10 percent.

Over fifty-nine percent (59.3 percent) of the

Hungarian community lives in villages with a population under 5,000. There are 13 townships with a Hungarian majority. The five cities where the ethnic Hungarian population exceeds 10,000 include Komárom (Komárno), Pozsony (Bratislava), Dunaszerdahely (Dunaská Streda), Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky) and Kassa (Kosice). When administrative borders were redrawn, linguistic boundaries (demarcating those settlements where the ethnic Hungarian population comprises at least ten percent of the population) were not taken into consideration. A large number of Hungarians also inhabit administrative districts that lie outside the mai Hungarian-inhabited region.

3. The Economy

The level of economic development of the Hungarian-inhabited region is below that of the other regions in Slovakia. This can be attributed to the following:

-The principal victims of the deportations of the 1945-48 period were entrepreneurs, merchants, land-owning farmers, apartment building owners and intellectuals belonging to the Hungarian national minority community. The Hungarian middle-class was eliminated.

-Per-capita state investment in the Hungarian-inhabited districts during the communist era -- containing approximately 23 percent of the entire population -- was 50-70 percent below that of districts exclusively inhabited by Slovaks.

-The proportion of fixed assets in the Hungarian-inhabited region was merely 14 percent of the Slovakian total.

The Hungarian population's economic activity and presence in the various economic sectors are less

favourable than those of the Slovak population. This is mainly due to the above-mentioned factors, but is also a result of the geographic distribution of the Hungarian population (the proportion of Hungarians living in villages is greater), the diminished job opportunities and the anti-Hungarian educational policies of the government (see Figures 3 and 4).

According to data gathered in May 1992, the unemployment rate was 14.9 percent in districts where the proportion of Hungarians exceeded 10 percent, whereas the unemployment rate for all of Slovakia was only 11.3 percent. In some Hungarian districts unemployment reaches 18-19 percent.

At the present time construction of the two most important energy-sources in Slovakia, the hydroelectric plant at Bős (Gabcíkovo) and the atomic power plant at Mohi (Mochovce), has a direct negative effect on both the environment and settlement patterns of the Hungarian population.

4. Education

In the post-World War II era, the size of the Hungarian intelligentsia almost completely disappeared as a result of the closing of Hungarian-language schools, deportations, forced

resettlement policies and the exchange of populations.

The current Hungarian-language school system was established in the 1950s. Government measures

aimed to assimilate Hungarians always included a reduction in the size of the Hungarian school system. Factors contributing to the weakening of the Hungarian school system in Slovakia include reorganization of school curriculae and faculty; the merging of schools; the placement of Slovak and Hungarian schools in the same township under one

administration; the lack of Hungarian-language teachers and the prohibition of a Hungarian-language university. As a result, there has been a decrease both in the number of Hungarian-language primary schools and primary school classes, and in the number of pupils attending Hungarian-language primary schools:

	1955	1961	1968	1970	1980	1990
Schools	565	559	494	490	295	257
Classes	2 014	2 639	2 902	2 854	2 114	2 071
Pupils	61 325	76 754	72 948	68 902	50 398	48 405

The reduction in the number of Hungarian-language schools contributed to the fact that in 1991-92, 36.4 percent of school-age Hungarians were unable to attend Hungarian-language schools. In 1960 this ratio was only 17 percent, and in 1970 it was 19 percent.

The situation is made even more grave by the lack of Hungarian teachers; according to present estimations by the turn of the century the lack will have grown to 2,000 teachers!

Hungarian-language secondary schools underwent similar changes. More than 50 percent of

Hungarian high school students are unable to pursue their studies in their native language. About 80 percent of those in the 14-18 age group attending vocational schools are not able to study in their native language. The proportion of Hungarians attending (Slovak-speaking) colleges and universities is 2-2.5 times less than the average in Slovakia. As a result, the educational level of Hungarians is abnormally lower than that of the Slovak population.

The following figures compare the different educational levels of the Hungarian and Slovak population:

EDUCATION LEVEL	1980		1991	
	SLOVAK	HUNGARIAN	SLOVAK	HUNGARIAN
BASIC	36.8%	49.5%	27.1%	39.5%
HIGH SCHOOL SKILLED WORKER	0.2%	0.1%	1.9%	0.9%
VOCATIONAL SCHOOL	10.3%	6.1%	13.9%	10.2%
UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE	4.0%	1.6%	6.1%	2.9%

The political changes that followed November 1989 did not result in a breakthrough in the government's educational policies affecting minorities. The government has not allowed national minority communities to establish their own, autonomous education system, and there are no appropriate legal and institutional safeguards for the

preservation and development of native language education for national minorities. In 1990, certain political forces in government refused to approve the establishment of an independent Hungarian-language teachers' college that would have provided, the necessary education of Hungarian teachers.

5. Culture

The downfall of communism has brought changes in the field of culture as well. The previous state subsidies are dwindling and new financial support has not yet arisen. The Hungarian press, book publishing and existing cultural organizations need further state support.

The budget passed in December 1992, however discrimination against Hungarian and other minority cultures even more. According to the budget the per capita subsidy for culture is

- 547.50 Sk for citizens of Slovak nationality and
- 189 Sk for those of non-Slovak nationality,
which amounts to one-third of the support that the Slovak culture receives.

This could lead to the total destruction of Hungarian cultural infrastructure in Slovakia.

The Slovak parliament defeated the motion of Hungarian deputies on establishing cultural autonomy.

6. Religion

According to 1991 census data, the religious affiliation of Hungarians in Slovakia is the following:

	Religious Affiliation						
	Roman Catholic	Greek Catholic	Hungarian Reformed (Calvinist)	Lutheran	Other	Claiming No Religious Affiliation	Unknown
1950	75.0%	1.2%	20.5%	3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
1991	64.9%	app. 1.4%	11.4%	2.2%	app. 0.6%	6.6%	12.9%

According to estimates, three-quarters of Christian Hungarians in Slovakia belong to the Roman Catholic Church (of whom a small fraction are Greek Catholics), and the remaining quarter is Protestant (mainly belonging to the Reformed Church). According to Reformed Church estimates, 20 percent of the Hungarian community (approximately 120,000 people) are of the Reformed faith.

The most urgent problem that Hungarian Roman Catholics face is a lack of ethnic Hungarian bishops. (In fact there is not a single Hungarian bishop in the episcopacy.) Because of the ageing of Hungarian priests and the fact that there is no seminary training that provides for their replacement, there is an insufficient number of Hungarian-speaking priests. A lack of Hungarian catechism teachers also hinders the development of Hungarian religious life and the establishment of Hungarian Roman Catholic schools.

By a large majority (approximately 80 percent), the membership of the Reformed Church is

Hungarian. Its most pressing problems include the training of new ministers and dealing with the consequences of several decades of religious persecution. As opposed to other Christian churches, the Reformed Church was subject to arbitrary state action as early as 1945. Its property, like all Hungarian property, was confiscated and has not been returned to this day. For this reason, it has been difficult to establish Hungarian Reformed schools and to revive religious activities in other spheres.

Despite its rich tradition, the Hungarian Lutheran Church is in the process of disappearing because of its Slovak nationalist tendencies. The church currently has almost no Hungarian ministers.

The Hungarian Jewish communities in Slovakia have disappeared. This is due mainly to the atrocities of World War II, but additional factors include the anti-Hungarian and anti-semitic policies of the state. This double pressure has also led to the disappearance of Hungarian Jewish organizations in Slovakia.

7. Political Activity

After a forced interruption of more than fifty years, beginning in November 1989 the Hungarians of Slovakia were again able to organize politically, establishing their own political organizations:

-*Coexistence* (Együttélés) is a centre-based political movement founded in February 1990, standing for both liberal and conservative traditions. Its aims include democratization, the establishment of a market economy, and the recognition of the rights of national minorities. Coexistence is the largest political organization of the Hungarian national minority community of Slovakia and has won parliamentary representation. It has observer status in the Liberal International and is full member of the FUEN.

-The *Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement* (Magyar Kereszténydemokrata Mozgalom) was founded in March 1990 and is also represented in parliament; it has observer status in EDU and is an associated member in EUCD.

-The *Hungarian People's Party* (Magyar Néppárt) was established in December 1991 and has no parliamentary representation.

-The *Hungarian Civic Party* (Magyar Polgári Párt)

was formed in January 1992 from the Independent Hungarian Initiative (Független Magyar Kezdeményezés) founded in November 1989, which was a member of the government coalition in 1990-1992. This party received no parliamentary seats in the 1992 elections. It has observer status in the Liberal International.

Coexistence and the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement formed a coalition in the 1990 and 1992 parliamentary elections, which was augmented by the Hungarian People's Party in 1992. The candidates of this coalition were elected to both the Federal Assembly in Prague and the Slovak National Council in Pozsony (Bratislava). The coalition is a member of the opposition in both parliamentary bodies. It received 8.66 percent of the total votes in the first free elections in 1990; its share fell to 7.42 percent in 1992. The coalition had 12 representatives in the Federal Assembly and continues to have 14 in the Slovak National Council.

The Hungarian Civic Party won 2.3 percent of the votes in 1992; the four Hungarian parties thus have nearly 10 percent of the votes in Slovakia.

In the 1990 local elections, the Hungarian parties

achieved the following results:

Coexistence elected 105 mayors and 2 416 local council members. The corresponding numbers for the other parties were 35 and 1 153 for the Hungarian Christian Democratic Party, and 27 and 482 for the

Hungarian Civic Party. In interim elections held since, Coexistence has proven to be the strongest Hungarian political force, claiming 120 mayors by 1993.

8. Legal Status (Present)

The political changes following November 1989 resulted in significant improvements in the general human rights and freedoms provided by Slovakia. As far as the legal rights of the national minorities are concerned, however, the situation has worsened.

Restrictions on the right to use one's native language

The Language Law adopted in October 1990 in the Republic of Slovakia is discriminative, as it protects the language of the majority over and beyond the ones of minorities. It denies equality of languages and fails to guarantee national minority communities the right to use their own language in their contact with the authorities. As a result of this law, Hungarian names are not entered in the birth register. The Ministry of Interior has nullified the results of referenda concerning the reestablishment of the original Hungarian names of townships, and has replaced bilingual signs with Slovak signs. In many townships, the authorities have refused to conduct marriage and funeral ceremonies in Hungarian.

Restrictions on constitutional rights

The Bill of Fundamental Rights and Liberties adopted by the Federal Assembly in Prague in January 1991 reduced the existing rights of minorities, also abrogating the previous constitutional law on minorities. The Bill defined the state as a national state of Czechs and Slovaks. The Assembly rejected the amendment proposed by the Hungarian members of the Assembly, based the Recommendation 1134 of the Council of Europe and on the CSCE Copenhagen Concluding Document. The Hungarian members left the room in protest.

Discrimination in the field of property rights

Laws adopted by the Federal Assembly relating to compensation (i.e. the Compensation Act and the Land Act) refer only to grievances concerning government actions taken after February 25, 1948, the date of the communist takeover. No compensation is offered for property losses suffered by Hungarians between 1945 and 1948; their grievances remain unremedied to this day. In the case of the Land Act, Hungarians who lost their land between 1945 and 1948 can reclaim only 50 hectares of land. This restriction does not apply to citizens of other nationalities.

Constitutional reinforcement of second-class status

The Republic of Slovakia proclaimed its

sovereignty after the June 1992 parliamentary elections and adopted the Constitution of the Republic on September 1, 1992. These two events paved the way for the independence of Slovakia, proclaimed on January 1, 1993. Proposals submitted by the Hungarian members of the Slovak National Council regarding the codification of certain civil rights, the provision of equal rights to minorities, the guarantee of the identity and self-government of the national minority communities, and the safeguarding of parliamentary democracy were rejected. As a result, the Hungarian members of the Slovak National Council unanimously rejected the Constitution, and left the hall in protest.

The Constitution defines the Republic of Slovakia as the national state of Slovaks and provides no guarantees for the preservation and safeguarding of the identities of national minority communities. As a result, the non-Slovak inhabitants of Slovakia are treated as second-class citizens.

The Constitution is most offensive in the following sections:

- Regarding the Rights of Association - According to the Constitution, only "national organizations" may be established by national minorities. This opens the way to the dissolution of their political parties at any time.
- Regarding education rights - The Constitution does not recognize the rights of national minority communities to establish and maintain native-language schools. Already existing native-language schools are therefore in danger of being closed down.
- Regarding language use - The Constitution replaces the concept of "official language" with that of "state language". It offers no legal guarantees for the use of minority languages in dealings with the authorities. This implies that we can anticipate further curtailment of minority language rights.
- Lack of trust in the minorities is demonstrated in a declaration that the rights of minorities may not endanger the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Slovakia. There is, however, no guarantee that state authorities will not misuse this restriction.

A denial of the right of national minority communities to their identity, homeland and self-government reflects the assimilationist goals of the state authorities. It also reflects their desire to create an ethnically homogeneous state by practising further ethnic cleansing.