

# SLOVAKIA'S SECOND TRANSITION

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The results of Slovakia's 2002 elections are among the most favorable signs of democratic consolidation since the country became an independent state a decade ago. Indeed, they can be said to mark the completion of a "second transition" to democracy altogether: The direct outcome of the vote was the reelection of Mikuláš Dzurinda's center-right coalition, which had first won power in 1998; but its most important feature was the defeat of an attempted comeback of the nationalist authoritarianism which, represented by Vladimír Mečiar, had dominated Slovakia in 1994–98. With the election of 2002, it became clear that Slovakia's nationalist-authoritarian experiment is effectively over. What remains to be seen is the extent and duration of its impact on Slovak political life.

Postcommunist authoritarianism is, of course, by no means unique to Slovakia. Many former Soviet-bloc countries made the transition to competitive elections only to see those elections won by forces with little interest in democratic consolidation. Indeed, so common are such regimes in the ebb of democracy's "third wave" that their identification and conceptualization has become an academic cottage industry, producing such coinages as "delegative democracy," "illiberal democracy," and, more recently, "competitive authoritarianism."<sup>1</sup> Since these regimes occasionally do submit themselves to elections (though rarely without manipulative precautions), their leaders are much more vulnerable than their communist predecessors and have commonly fallen from power out of excess and overconfidence. In their electoral defeats, however, these leaders have not faced the sort of humiliating loss of legitimacy that attended the fall of communism. Indeed, they often preserve some

hopes for future electoral success. Even if they fail in these subsequent bids, they may yet retain the capacity to hamper democratic development in ways that most collapsed or transformed communist parties did not.

Accordingly, in some ways, Slovakia's "second transition" to democracy may appear to be more daunting than the first. Today's leaders must contend not only with the legacies of communism but with the unique legacies of postcommunist authoritarianism as well. And they must do so on the basis of often-disparate and fractious coalitions with few common goals beyond democratic restoration. Understanding how Slovakia managed to maintain continuity in its most recent election is critically important to other countries that have attempted to renew democratic consolidation after periods of stagnation or reversal—offering reasons for both concern and hope. Some legacies of postcommunist authoritarianism continue to hobble the country's democratic development, but others have actually helped inoculate Slovakia against another return to authoritarian leadership.

### **The Not-So-Velvet Underside**

After the 1989 "velvet revolution" against communist rule and 1993's "velvet divorce" dissolving Czechoslovakia, there seemed to be fewer and fewer things about Slovak political life that one could describe as "velvet." Under Mečiar's prime-ministerial leadership, the government of Slovakia developed an increasingly rough edge, becoming so inhospitable to ethnic minorities and so intolerant of political opposition that both the European Union and NATO rejected its application for membership on political grounds alone. U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright went so far as to call the country "a hole in the map of Europe,"<sup>2</sup> while Freedom House ranked its civil liberties as being on the same level as those of Croatia, Moldova, and Russia.<sup>3</sup>

The defining feature of Mečiar's rule—particularly after his reelection in 1994—was a consistent and unabashed effort to centralize power in his own hands in a mode that Guillermo O'Donnell has described as "delegative democracy."<sup>4</sup> More and more, the government sought to shield itself from any potential source of accountability. In a vicious cycle of escalating repression, the regime evaded legal responsibility for its actions by extending its political control over the police, prosecutors, and even some judges. Ultimately the government's encroachments began to undermine not only what O'Donnell would call "horizontal accountability" to other institutions but also any "vertical accountability" to voters: By manipulating a country-wide referendum in 1997 and enacting a restrictive new election law in 1998, the Mečiar government attempted to insulate itself from even the most basic forms of democratic constraint.

These increasingly desperate efforts at self-defense eventually provoked strong public opposition, leading to Mečiar's defeat in the 1998 parliamentary elections. But even in defeat, Mečiar continued to shape Slovakia's political environment through the mechanisms of delegative democracy that he had created. His style of politics has had serious and lasting effects not only on the organization of his own party but on the relationships among Slovakia's parties, its state, and its general electorate.

During the 1990s, Slovakia stood out to political scientists as the "hard case" of the postcommunist world. While its story generally fit with standard-issue accounts of Eastern and Central Europe as a whole—accounts that tended to focus on the volatility of voter preferences, the fragmentation of political parties, or the weakness of party institutions—Slovakia's central problems were nevertheless distinct. Particularly exceptional was the combination of a high degree of organization and centralization of power in its largest political party: Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). While there tended to be a fairly stark trade-off for postcommunist parties between, on the one hand, their degree of organization and, on the other, the extent to which power was centralized in their leaderships' hands, HZDS managed to combine high levels of both. For a postcommunist strongman, Mečiar devoted an unusual degree of attention to party organization, building a powerful network of regional and local party units. At the same time, he geared the upper echelons of HZDS in a way meant to keep control in his own hands and relied only on trusted (though still closely watched) subordinates to run party activities.

The strategy worked, to a point: From HZDS's 1991 inception through the 2002 election, no party won more votes in a national race and few even came close. The party's strong grassroots organization allowed it to retain massive support even when it was no longer in government and nearly out of cash. At the same time, HZDS's dense centralization meant that Mečiar's word remained decisive within the party, even during the scandal-plagued 1994–98 government and the disastrous 1998 election, which marked the party's poorest electoral performance ever and saw it unable to secure any coalition partners. Whereas a decentralized party might have found a new leader, and a poorly organized one might have lost significant popular support, Mečiar's party did neither.

A second major pillar of Mečiar's governing strategy—and a second major legacy inherited by the government that succeeded his—was the wide overlap among state, party, and economic institutions. Mečiar's governments dramatically increased the role of money in politics by linking the fortunes of economic interests and political parties through a practically unrestrained distribution of state property.<sup>5</sup> This sort of thing was not new to Slovakia, but the magnitude certainly was. During the election campaign of 1998, HZDS seemed to have access to unlim-

ited campaign funds—permitting enormous rallies, complete with laser-light shows, flyovers by military helicopters, and promotional appearances by celebrities such as Gérard Depardieu and Claudia Schiffer. These overlapping political and financial structures played important roles in Mečiar's strategy for avoiding horizontal accountability and permitted him literally to buy the continued loyalty of coalition partners (particularly at such critical junctures as a coalition crisis that might otherwise have unseated him in 1996). Meanwhile, the country's major economic interests grew accustomed to representation both in parliament and at the highest levels of government, and sought to insinuate themselves even more thoroughly into Slovak politics. As the 2002 election approached, three of the four largest new parties in the country possessed strong ties to major corporate interests.

### **Nationalism and Authoritarianism**

Mečiar's third and most important source of influence derived from his imprint on the basic terms of Slovak political discourse—particularly, his mobilization both of national identity and of authoritarian leanings. In the eight years that followed the fall of communism, most East and Central European countries followed the example of their Western counterparts in developing terms of political competition that centered on questions of market freedom, economic redistribution, and social safety nets. So it was in Slovakia in the early 1990s. But by the middle of the decade, these terms had been all but entirely crowded out by issues of nationality and authority.

Mečiar played a central role in this shift. He was not, to be sure, solely responsible for the materialization of nationalist political cleavages as such (opinion surveys show stronger socioeconomic and cultural underpinnings for national divisions in Slovakia than in neighboring countries), but he was central in shaping their contours. Mečiar was a key participant in the regime-restructuring negotiations in Czechoslovakia that took place in the wake of the June 1992 elections, and soon after became closely associated with the prospect of Slovakia's independence. While not necessarily setting out to create an independent Slovakia,<sup>6</sup> he quickly took on the mantle of independence with greater and greater enthusiasm. And with his direct and forceful personal style, he quickly emerged as the favorite candidate among those who believed that postcommunist chaos required the firm hand of a strong leader—a belief that gradually evolved into a widespread acceptance of one-party rule and a general disdain for the very idea of political opposition. By the time of the 1998 elections, popular sentiment on issues of national identity and political authority had become together the main issues on which interparty competition turned.

Yet Mečiar's successes in hinging the stakes of Slovak politics on

these issues came at a high cost. When Slovakia's nationalist-authoritarian parties gained a parliamentary majority in 1994, they saw this as a license—even a mandate—to forge a “delegative democracy” that showed little tolerance for “outsiders.” But as the government's policies (and in particular its violations of horizontal accountability) became more extreme, its fixation on nationality and authority began to repel more voters than it attracted. Mečiar's coalition accordingly found itself with a voting bloc too small to provide a workable parliamentary majority. Between the 1994 and 1998 elections, the share of seats won by HZDS and its coalition partners dropped from 55 to 38 percent.

In 1998 general elections, a surprisingly diverse opposition coalition was able to take advantage of this sharp decline and won a clear majority. With a new government diametrically opposed to HZDS's nationalist-authoritarian stance, Slovakia suddenly found itself with one of the most staunchly prodemocratic and pro-Western governments in the region. The 1998 governing coalition was, however, difficult to sustain, for the partners had little in common apart from their commitment to oust Mečiar and restore good relations with the West. In particular, they lacked any meaningful coherence on socioeconomic and sociocultural questions—some members strongly pro-market, others strongly statist; some devoutly Roman Catholic, others vocally atheistic. The coalition also contained divisions between Slovaks and Hungarians, and while Slovak members of the coalition rejected Mečiar's exclusivist rhetoric and policy, the differing interests of the two ethnic communities (particularly on questions of language) generated considerable tension.

The parties of the new coalition had little choice but to work together, even when their intramural differences were—as they often were—more acute than those between coalition and opposition parties. In the absence of other coalition options, and with the prospect of favorable results in pre-term elections, each major coalition party held an effective veto over the coalition as a whole. But the sharp divergence of ideological positions within the coalition led to conflicts of unusual intensity and rhetorical ferocity, contributing in turn to high levels of public distrust for the coalition parties themselves.

The effects of such tension within the coalition proved especially devastating for member-parties on the left. The Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK)—an ungainly combination of mostly right-wing parties—dissolved in considerable bitterness, but its successor outfits managed to stabilize their positions. Even at their least popular, Prime Minister Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) managed to retain a significant share of the coalition's 1998 voters. Left-wing member-parties, however, lost support dramatically: Between the end of 1999 and the late spring of 2000, the successor to the Communists, the Party of

the Democratic Left (SDL), lost more than half of its voters, and in a September 2000 survey the party dropped below the 5 percent electoral threshold for the first time since forming in 1989. By the summer of 2001, all the left-leaning parties in the coalition had fallen well below the threshold and faced only slim chances of reelection.

Polarization on the issues of national identity and political authority not only created discord among coalition partners and dissatisfaction among voters; it also helped prevent any resolution to these problems within the existing party system. Unlike most democracies, in which swing voters shift their preference between the governing party or coalition and the opposition, Slovakia's sharply polarized system kept dissatisfied voters from going over to "the other side." In a series of surveys conducted during the spring and summer of 2002, only 6 percent of those who had voted for the Dzurinda coalition reported crossing the line and supporting parties of the Mečiar coalition.<sup>7</sup> Even with the collapse of those parties on the coalition's left, voter defection did not exceed 8 percent. So although the Dzurinda government became extremely unpopular, the Mečiar-led opposition reaped no substantial gains. Instead, many unsatisfied voters moved off in a new direction, opting for newer parties (established after 1998) instead. Survey evidence shows that television magnate Pavel Rusko's Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO) provided a popular alternative for right-wing voters dissatisfied with Dzurinda. Left-wing coalition voters, by contrast, tended to opt for a party called "Direction" (Smer), founded by a young and charismatic former deputy of SDL, Robert Fico. The increased support for Smer corresponds precisely with the decline of SDL, Fico having provided a timely alternative for voters dissatisfied with the older parties of the left, which were themselves unable successfully to advance their basic political goals while hemmed into a coalition dominated by the right.

### **Slovakia's Post-Transition Election, Take Two**

Of course, only so much of Slovakia's political condition leading up to the 2002 elections can be laid directly at the feet of Mečiar. Dzurinda's coalition exhibited remarkable diplomatic and political skill in mending relationships with Western institutions and in bringing Slovakia back into consideration for NATO and EU membership, but it also became mired in personal and political conflicts, squandering opportunities to implement key domestic political and economic measures that might have bolstered its support among voters. In general, though, the legacy of HZDS's organization—along with its corruption and the polarization it engendered in matters of nationality and authority—was decisive from 1998 to 2002, producing a large but isolated opposition, a fragmented coalition that faced strong challenges from new parties, and the concentrated involvement of powerful economic interests on all sides.

**TABLE—PERCENTAGE OF VOTES AND NUMBER OF SEATS OF MAJOR PARTIES IN SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 1994–2002**

PARTY FAMILY	PARTY	1994		1998		2002	
		% OF VOTES	# OF SEATS	% OF VOTES	# OF SEATS	% OF VOTES	# OF SEATS
SLOVAK NATIONALIST/ AUTHORITARIAN	Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	35.1	61	27.0	43	19.5	36
	Movement for Democracy (HZD)	-	-	-	-	3.3	0
	Slovak National Party (SNS)	5.4	9	9.1	14	3.3	0
	Real Slovak National Party (PSNS)	-	-	-	-	3.7	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>36.1</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>29.8</b>	<b>36</b>
LEFT	Party of the Democratic Left (SDL)	10.4	18	14.7	23	1.4	0
	Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	2.7	0	2.8	0	6.3	11
	Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS)	7.4	14	1.3	0	0.5	0
	Direction (Smer)	-	-	-	-	13.5	25
	Party of Civic Understanding (SOP)	-	-	8.0	13	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>21.7</b>	<b>36</b>
RIGHT	Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	10.1	17	(in SDK)		8.3	15
	Democratic Union (DU)	8.6	15	(in SDK)		-	-
	Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK)	-	-	26.4	42	-	-
	Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU)	-	-	-	-	15.1	28
	Alliance of New Citizens(ANO)	-	-	-	-	8.0	15
	<b>Total</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>31.4</b>	<b>58</b>
HUNGARIAN	Hungarian Coalition (MK/MKP)	10.2	17	9.1	15	11.2	20

Note: There are 150 seats in the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

Despite a few surprises, the 2002 campaign and election showed important signs of continuity with 1998. As the Table above shows, seven parties gained the 5 percent of the popular vote necessary for obtaining parliamentary mandates. Three of these parties—Rusko’s ANO, Fico’s Smer, and the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)—were newcomers to parliament. The other four parties represented more enduring political entities: Mečiar’s HZDS, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), and Dzurinda’s SDKU. Several other parties lost parliamentary delegations, including the left-leaning SDL and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), as well as the Slovak National Party (SNS), and a number of smaller parties that entered parliament as part of the SDK coalition.

By standard measures of parliamentary composition, these changes suggest a dramatic increase in the fragmentation and volatility of Slovakia's political-party system. In reality, however, the 2002 election results only reveal divisions that had been obscured in previous elections: The 1998 SDK coalition campaigned as a single party but contained five distinct units. If these are treated as distinct units, then the 2002 parliament actually represents a slight *decrease* in overall fragmentation, whether measured by the absolute number of parties or by more sophisticated measures of party system size. Similarly, the number of seats changing hands from one party to another does increase, but less dramatically than it appears to if the 1998 SDK coalition and its offshoot parties are treated together.

Furthermore, although the party composition of the new parliament differed significantly from its predecessor's, the new allotment of seats allowed for substantial continuity in the formation of a governing coalition. Offshoots of the SDK coalition fell only slightly short of the coalition's 1998 vote-share, while the Hungarian coalition party actually exceeded its previous mark. Together with the market-oriented newcomer ANO, these parties commanded a narrow parliamentary majority—78 seats out of 150—and soon formed a governing coalition. Dzurinda's reelection as premier marks him as one of the few in the postcommunist world to hold that top office for two successive parliamentary terms.

Understanding how these results bear out the significance of Mečiar's legacy requires a closer look at the three main electoral and institutional streams that shape political development in Slovakia: the emerging right, the fragmented left, and the nationalist-authoritarian alternative.

### **The Right Ascendant? The Left in Pieces?**

The biggest surprise of the 2002 election is unquestionably the second-place finish of Dzurinda's SDKU. The party, which had been polling at a steady 8 to 10 percent, found itself with an unexpected 15 percent of the actual vote, whereas Fico's Smer, which had consistently occupied second place with a steady 15 to 17 percent, found itself with only 13.5 percent of the vote. In part, the success of SDKU reflected a general tendency of voters to opt at the last minute for the devils they knew over the ones they did not. All but two of the seven more established parties received higher levels of support from the voters than they did in the final pre-election opinion surveys. By contrast, all but one of the five major parties formed after January 2000 performed worse. The shifts between the two correspond roughly to the levels of uncertainty among voters for the various parties in the months before the election. SDKU may also owe some share of its late and unexpected popularity to an effective voting participation drive coordinated by a coalition of West-

ern-oriented (and largely Western-funded) non-governmental organizations and foundations and to the success of SDKU's firm stance on NATO and EU integration.

Whatever the full set of explanations for SDKU's success, its five-point jump dramatically changed Slovakia's political landscape, making possible the most ideologically coherent coalition in more than a decade—nearly uniform in its pro-Western and pro-market orientations and sufficiently similar on questions of accountability and minority rights. Furthermore, although its majority remains extremely small, there are reasons for believing that the coalition can avoid fragmentation. Particularly promising in this regard is the high level of institutionalization of the coalition parties. Of the four, only ANO lacks a strong organizational base and a well-integrated leadership.

In fact, the coalition managed to assemble a parliamentary majority largely because its members faced the least electoral damage from splinter parties. If just one other party had been able to enter Parliament, or one major splinter among the nationalist parties had been avoided, the four-party coalition would have fallen several seats short of a majority. The "victory" of the right must therefore be regarded as extremely tentative. The parties appear to have learned little from their previous coalition experience, having begun their term in office with bitter fights over the control of various ministries—fights which are in turn reinforcing public perceptions of politics as a game of self-enrichment. What is more, the coalition's success in gaining invitations to NATO and EU membership may also prove to be its undoing. In the effort to ensure that Slovaks support integration, coalition rhetoric has largely sidestepped its potential costs. And when those costs begin to hit ordinary Slovaks, demand for social protection may cause voters to turn elsewhere.

Of course, the call for social protection will only hurt the right if there are viable parties on the left to respond. With the implosion of the SDE, Slovakia has become one of the world's very few electoral democracies without a recognizable social-democratic party in Parliament. After the election disaster suffered by Slovakia's numerous extraparliamentary left-leaning parties, they began to discuss the possibility of cooperation, or even integration, but there remains little chance that so many small parties—each with a leader who is unwilling to surrender the position of party chief—could form any kind of coherent and attractive political unit.

Many of those who left the sinking SDE opted for its distant relative, the Slovak Communist Party (KSS), which received an even greater election-weekend bounce, in proportional terms, than that of SDKU. A party of true believers, KSS struck out on its own when Slovakia's original Communist Party softened its name and image in the early 1990s. With the collapse of the SDE and other more moderate leftist parties, support for the KSS began to approach the 5 percent parliamentary threshold by

the summer of 2002. In approaching the threshold, the party gained additional media attention and public recognition that appears to have helped it gain yet more support. Once in parliament, its leaders acted to capitalize on their visibility and secure the party's position. KSS's rejection of integration and economic reform is, to be sure, more extreme than those of most Slovak voters, but the party does not appear to be in immediate danger of losing the protest voters it attracted in the 2002 election and may indeed attract a limited number of additional converts.

The immediate fate of the political left in Slovakia hinges most, however, on the figure of Robert Fico. Although the Smer's 13.5 percent of the vote was enough to elect 25 parliamentary deputies, it is clear that Fico sets the direction of his party. In what became in essence a campaign for the office of premier, Fico offered an idiosyncratic agenda of administrative reform and social protection, along with promises to fight crime and occasional veiled appeals to anti-Roma sentiment. After his unexpectedly poor third-place finish, Fico may well rethink this strategy. One option open to him is to solidify and clarify his leftist credentials and in an attempt to fill the gap in social-democratic representation left by the demise of SDL. It is not yet clear, though, whether such an effort would gain more votes than it would cost or whether there would be considerable demand for a straightforwardly social-democratic party among Slovak voters at all.

Two additional considerations are worth noting. First, if surveys show the promise of electoral gains on the center-left and Fico fails to reap them, then Slovakia may see the emergence of one or more new social-democratic parties—modeled organizationally on media-driven, organizationally weak parties such as Smer and ANO, and sponsored by firms or wealthy individuals wishing to influence politics. Second, improvement in the support for left-leaning parties may depend upon developments within Mečiar's HZDS, since that party has gradually come to attract many of those who have lost the most in Slovakia's economic transformation and who, if they were not loyal to Mečiar, might well vote for a left-leaning party that favored social protections.

### **The Nationalists in Decline**

Any leader who has made two comebacks to a premiership should never be underestimated, but recent events point to Mečiar's diminishing importance. And though he has remained prominent in Slovakia's politics, the threat of his return had become insignificant even before the 2002 elections. Ironically, although Mečiar's legacies of party centralization, corruption, and polarization variously hobbled Slovakia's democratic development, they also made his return increasingly unlikely.

In late 2001 and early 2002, HZDS's apparently strong showing in Slovakia's regional elections, and the party's sharp rise in popular sup-

port as reflected in certain opinion surveys, produced a wave of concern that the 2002 elections would reverse the gains of the Dzurinda coalition and prevent Slovakia's entry into NATO and the EU.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the danger of a fourth Mečiar government remained low, and Mečiar would have had little opportunity to repeat his past encroachments even if he had by chance regained the premiership. Since dissatisfaction sent voters to new parties rather than to existing opposition parties, support for Mečiar and his party never went much above its traditional range of 25 to 30 percent, while weakness and internal divisions among allied parties meant that there was no hope of resurrecting the 1994–98 coalition. Even at its final peak in January 2002, such a coalition would still have fallen eight seats short of a majority. Furthermore, since all of the governing parties and most of the new nongoverning parties publicly ruled out cooperation with HZDS, any hope that Mečiar had for a return to government depended on a coalition with Robert Fico's Smer. But Fico repeated publicly that he would only consider cooperation with HZDS if it did not include Mečiar. It is important to note that even if Fico reneged on that promise, Mečiar could not have returned to the status quo ante. Fico's political strength and personal popularity, along with the new institutional checks such as a directly elected presidency and a Dzurinda-appointed Constitutional Court, would have imposed far tighter restraints on Mečiar than he had faced among the subservient coalition partners and weak institutions of 1994–98.

After the public opinion surveys of January 2002, HZDS's support dropped back to its normal range, but its corruption and intraparty centralization intervened to hurt the party's electoral chances. During the late spring and early summer, party support fell into a slow but steady decline as Mečiar struggled to explain where he got the money to buy an expensive villa. (Although allegations of corruption had surrounded Mečiar's associates and even his relatives for some time, he had thus far been able to avoid serious charges that he had used his political position for *personal* gain.) And in July 2002, any remaining fears of Mečiar's return to power dissolved when his insistence on party control created the most serious party rift in nearly a decade. When, in an attempt to ensure his own supremacy, Mečiar eliminated several of the party's most popular supporting figures from its electoral list, hostility overcame organizational integrity. Several of the figures slighted by Mečiar left the party to form their own, one with an almost identical name—the Movement for Democracy (HZD)—and insignia. After HZD was founded, a variety of surveys showed a precipitous drop in HZDS's popular support, some showing it to have fallen below 20 percent for the first time ever. Though HZD itself proved to have little staying power, its early signs of popular support in the 8-to-10 percent range quickly subsiding, the voters that followed it away from HZDS did not return, dispersing instead throughout the electoral marketplace.

The future of HZDS and its leader remains very much in question. In addition to diminishing numbers of loyal voters, the party also faces the prospect of significant internal conflict as its leaders attempt to break the political isolation that has made their party a marginal political actor despite its great electoral potential. Since Mečiar is the primary source of *both* the isolation and the electoral potential, the task may be impos-

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sible, particularly since he has expressed little inclination to resign or accede to his promotion to “emeritus” status. Given Mečiar’s track record of party control and his unwillingness to suffer slights, it is likely that the party’s rebels will ultimately lose their battle for intraparty reform and defect to an existing party, or found yet another party of HZDS exiles. Should Mečiar’s rivals succeed in taking control of the party, it is Mečiar who might consider forming a party of his own. In either case, Slovakia will in the coming years

see the splintering of HZDS and the further decline of Mečiar’s political potential to its basic elements—namely, his personal connection with an aging, poorly educated, and geographically isolated electorate that views him as the father of the Slovak nation. If Mečiar does not follow through on his oft-repeated but never-kept promise to withdraw from politics, he might indefinitely sustain such a connection, and through it, perhaps, 7 to 15 percent of the vote. The sinecure of parliamentary seats provided by Mečiar’s name alone can attract enough political opportunists to sustain some minimal form of party.

Although HZDS may remain the country’s largest party, Mečiar’s political isolation has pushed it into a marginal position with no partners and little influence (even less, perhaps than the Czech Republic’s unreconstructed Communist party). Its 19 percent share of the popular vote in the 2002 election, coupled with the disappearance from parliament of other explicitly nationalist parties, has significantly weakened the nationalist-authoritarian strain in Slovak politics. As nationalist-authoritarian parties have been pushed to the political margins, the issues they champion have found fewer advocates and played a smaller role in political debate generally. (When asked about their party’s main electoral theme for 2002, a leader of the Slovak National Party, known primarily for its attacks on ethnic Hungarians, responded without a moment’s hesitation, “Unemployment!”) The issues of nationality and authority do still shape Slovakia’s political life more strongly than they do in neighboring central European countries, but long-overshadowed socioeconomic issues—centering on the role of markets and the scope

of redistribution—increasingly determine the most important lines of debate. Without the decline of nationalist-authoritarianism, Slovakia would not now possess a governing coalition whose member-parties all stand on the same side of the economic spectrum.

### Lessons for Overcoming Authoritarianism

Slovakia's second transition holds important implications for the country's recovery from postcommunist backsliding toward authoritarianism (and perhaps for overcoming authoritarianism more generally). Slovakia's experience must of course be understood in context: Compared to the situations in Croatia, Serbia, or, say, Belarus, the cultural and structural underpinnings of Mečiar's accountability violations appear extremely weak. All the same, a look at Mečiar's methods of governing reflects the deliberate appropriation of the methods of Croatia's Franjo Tuđman and Serbia's Slobodan Milošević, as well as a consciousness of the need to unearth or generate some kind of animosity toward outsiders in order to justify his attenuations of political accountability. Tuđman and Milošević found such resources much closer to the surface than did Mečiar, whose efforts ultimately exhausted his capacities and cost him more support than it gained him. Nevertheless, the politicization of the issues of nation and authority persist, having outlasted Mečiar's relevance as a direct political player in Slovakia. And since Mečiar is among the first leaders of his type to be pushed out of office, his example cannot be ignored.

Mečiar offers a textbook case of how political elites can mobilize national sentiment for the purpose of strengthening their own authority. That this could happen in relatively prosperous, relatively peaceful, relatively Western Slovakia suggests that other new democracies should be slow to dismiss the problem as being one from which they could never suffer. Slovakia was perhaps more prone to nationalistic political mobilization than were other Central European countries—mainly because of Slovak animosity toward Czechs and Hungarians—but the intensity of these feelings cannot compare, for example, to the interethnic hatreds that have run among Croats and Serbs over the past dozen-odd years. Yet even Slovaks' faded memories of national humiliation amounted to a lure sufficient for Mečiar to attract a bloc of voters that would accept his encroachments on rival institutions and tolerate his use of state resources to strengthen his own control. Nationalism was particularly useful to HZDS because it cut across economic and religious cleavages and ensured a divided opposition. Mečiar's brand of political nationalism may be on the wane. But as he himself discovered late in his third government, oppressive majorities (like the Czechs) and restive minorities (like the Hungarians) are not the only potential targets as "national enemies"; the West

and Western integration can also play that role. With states that are still weak and economies that are still fragile, the new democracies of Eastern and Central Europe are still at risk of a return to some—if not all—of the nationalist-authoritarian characteristics of the “old regime.”

The history of Slovakia under Mečiar shows the danger of nationalist authoritarianism even where it does not ultimately succeed. Political divides forged along ethnonational lines are slow to disappear, and patterns of high-level corruption are difficult to eliminate. Moreover, would-be authoritarian leaders often exert inordinate political influence even after they have been forced out of office: When they share parliament with a democratically inclined coalition, they tend heavily to limit that coalition’s room for maneuver and to force its members into compromises that undercut their own electoral support. Unless a postauthoritarian government can somehow draw in moderates while isolating extremists—often an enormously difficult task—it will face chronic political instability.

Despite the bad omens, however, Slovakia does offer hope. The Dzurinda coalition quite handily defeated Mečiar in two successive elections. Mečiar’s legacy produced other problems, but Mečiar himself remained out of power and currently poses a vanishing threat. Indeed, the methods of men like Mečiar are extremely fickle. Like plundering armies, such leaders feed on their successes, but when they lose their momentum, they lose their sustenance. Adulation of the party leader turns to recrimination when that party loses elections; corruption becomes harder to hide when parties leave office and their successors decide to investigate; and the concentration of authoritarian-friendly voters in one camp tends to encourage cooperation on the other side. Once begun, a second transition can rely on and help to encourage at least some of these virtuous cycles.

It may also help other second-transition leaders make the right decisions. Slovakia’s example boasts few acts of superior courage or intellect; at times, in fact, the Dzurinda coalition’s blunders seemed to doom its chances. But it did take at least two steps that merit emulation. The first turns on a single inclusionary choice: Coalition leaders invited the formal participation of the Hungarian party from the outset, even though that party was not strictly necessary for a simple parliamentary majority. Not only did the coalition’s inclusion of the Hungarians provide a useful constitutional majority and a much-needed cushion in the event of subsequent defections from coalition parties; it also allowed moderately nationalist Slovaks to grow accustomed to the idea of Hungarians in government. Since disaster did not immediately follow—and since the Hungarian leaders in the government proved themselves to be among the most competent and professional of its members—interethnic antagonism markedly declined. Thus broadened, the coalition’s space for

political maneuver remained wide and the inclusion of Hungarians in the 2002 cabinet came as a matter of course.

The second step involved a subsequent string of choices by all major coalition parties to remain together in government despite constant irritations and injuries. As with the Social Democrats in the neighboring Czech Republic, the Dzurinda coalition's ability to remain in power for a full four years provided just enough time for economic performance to cycle back into its favor.

The second Dzurinda coalition will require even more skill if it is to retain its popularity in its second term. Crucially, though, its survival is no longer essential to the survival of Slovak democracy itself. Indeed, the surest sign of success for Slovakia's second effort at consolidation will be a 2006 election in which the stakes appear relatively low.

## NOTES

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1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65; Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (January 1994): 55–69; Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (November–December 1997): 22–43, and *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

2. "Slovakia: TASR Reports Albright, Kovac Remarks at Washington Lunch," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 29 January 1998.

3. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 1998–1999 (New York: Freedom House, 1999). See also Adrian Karatnycky, "The 1999 Freedom House Survey: A Century of Progress," *Journal of Democracy* 11 (January 2000): 187–200.

4. Mečiar's mode of delegative democracy is unusual for having appeared within a parliamentary system, but as Ergun Özbudun argued concerning Turkey during the mid-1990s, transplanting delegative democracy into parliamentary structures requires only "strong party discipline and an absence of intraparty democracy." See Ergun Özbudun, "Turkey: How Far from Consolidation?" *Journal of Democracy* 7 (July 1996): 123–38.

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