

Łukasz Lewkowicz

“We didn’t write the past, the future is in our hands”: a new Slovak-Hungarian opening in the shadow of Trianon

June 4th marks 100 since the treaty was signed in Trianon, which resulted in the loss of a significant part of Hungary’s territory and population and in Slovakia being proclaimed as part of the newly created Czechoslovakia. In early June, Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok and Prime Minister Igor Matovič paid official visits to Budapest. Both politicians declare a new opening in the Slovak-Hungarian relations: the dynamization of bilateral relations, the legislative changes regarding national minorities, and the implementation of joint cross-border projects. During the meeting of the Prime Minister with representatives of the Hungarian minority, the non-parliamentary Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) submitted a memorandum demanding that Hungary be granted special rights, which was widely criticized by Slovak politicians.

Complicated Slovak-Hungarian relations. Since the establishment of independent Slovakia in 1993, Hungary has been regarded as an important political partner in the region of Central Europe. An additional factor in mutual relations is the nearly half-million, politically well-organized Hungarian minority living in a compact area in southern Slovakia. From the beginning, the fear of the Slovak authorities was raised by autonomous or even revisionist tendencies from Hungary. In the past, they were fueled by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, who had, in the 1990s, limited the possibility of using national minority languages in offices, or by the leader of the Slovak National Party (SNS) Ján Slota, who co-ruled Slovakia during 2006-2010. The introduction by the government of Viktor Orbán to facilitate the granting of additional Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living in neighboring countries had caused negative reactions on the Slovak side. At that time, Slovakia had adopted a law withdrawing Slovak citizenship if it another citizenship was granted. After the Social Democrats victory in the 2012 parliamentary election, the Hungarian question was postponed. During 2016-2020, the Hungarian party Most-Híd formed the coalition government. There is currently no party in the Slovak parliament representing Slovak Hungarians.

“Proven” cooperation with Hungary. In previous years, Igor Matovič – still as an opposition politician – considered Viktor Orbán as an “enemy” and actively protested in the Slovak parliament against allowing the Hungarian minority the possibility of dual citizenship. After the parliamentary elections in 2020, there was a significant change in this policy’s approach to Slovak-Hungarian relations. The new government program for 2020-2024 highlighted “proven cooperation” with Hungary. The Visegrad Group (V4), in which both countries cooperate on a multilateral level, was recognized as the most important regional format of Slovakia. The Slovak authorities have also announced the preparation and adoption of a law on national minorities, an amendment to the law on state language, and the creation of a special office for national minorities.

On June 2nd, two days until the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok paid an official visit to Budapest. During the meeting, he assessed Slovak-Hungarian relations as very good. According to Korčok, *the Treaty on Good Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation*, signed 25 years ago, contains everything that is currently needed to develop mutual relations. During the meeting, talks were held on joint infrastructure and energy projects, the COVID-19 pandemic and the opening of borders, as well as the Slovak Act on National Minorities. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, Péter Szijjártó, listed specific projects that will be completed in the coming years: the Danube bridge is to be commissioned by the end of summer between the border cities of Komárom and Komárn, in turn, and by 2022 six new border crossings are planned to be opened, including three new bridges on the Ipola River. By 2024, the capacity of gas connections is to be increased, and by the end of this year a common electric network will also be connected. The heads of

diplomacy of both countries openly talked about Trianon. Korčok expressed the opinion that Slovaks and Hungarians, like all Europeans, have very complex historical experiences. In his opinion, an event that is a failure for some can be a victory for others, and what is a trauma for some can be the beginning of freedom for others. He emphasized that in the context of Trianon, the beginning of June will be a time of “empathy”.

Prime Minister in Budapest. Hungary was also chosen as the target of the second official foreign visit of Prime Minister Matovič, which took place on June 12th (the Czech Republic has been traditionally the target of the first visit). During the meeting with Prime Minister Orbán, Matovič stressed that he wanted to equalize Hungarians' rights in Slovakia. To this end, announcements from the government program regarding national minorities are to be implemented. The prime minister of Slovakia described Hungarians not only as neighbors but also as “close friends”. He spoke about the shared history of both nations and announced the preparation of a Slovak-Hungarian history textbook (in the past, Prime Ministers Robert Fico and Ferenc Gyurcsány had also planned to publish a joint textbook for which a working group was created in 2007 but which failed to produce any results). The issue of the anniversary of Trianon was not included in the agenda of the visit. The topic appeared during a press conference after the meeting of both government delegations. A reporter from the Slovakian private television TA3 asked Orbán what he meant during the Trianon anniversary speech in which he spoke about the harm of Hungary and the impending victory of the country. The Hungarian Prime Minister replied that the Hungarian and Slovak perception of Trianon would never be the same because the Hungarians are the last nation of the old Asian steppe world that no one in the world understands. He added, however, that one should look to the future and focus on cooperation with neighbors. The Prime Minister of Hungary mentioned that Slovakia is the third most important economic partner of this country, and he also encouraged Slovak entrepreneurs to invest in Hungary. Slovak politicians emphasized that the meeting was held in a friendly atmosphere.

Currently, there are several members of Hungarian nationality in the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities party (OLaNO), and Prime Minister Matovič is also building relations with Hungarian politicians who are outside parliament. For example, József Berényi, deputy chairman of the local government in Trnava and former chairman of the SMK, was a member of the government delegation in Budapest. Berényi, in the second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda, served as the secretary of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while as chairman of the SMK he cooperated closely with Hungarian Fidesz. Berényi is described by Matovič as a friend.

Non-consulted Hungarian autonomy project. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Trianon and the Hungarian Day of National Unity celebrated on June 4th, Igor Matovič organized an informal meeting at Bratislava Castle on June 2nd under the slogan *We did not write the past, the future is in our hands (Minulosť sme nepísali, budúcnosť je v našich rukách)* with 100 representatives of Hungarian minorities. Politicians, local government officials, teachers, scientists, and people of culture participated. The originator of the event was the mentioned József Berényi. An incident occurred during the meeting. SMK representatives, without prior consultation, submitted to the Prime Minister a *Memorandum of the Hungarian community*, which contained a demand for Hungarians' autonomy in southern Slovakia. The signatories of the document referred to the *Memorandum of the Slovak Nation*, adopted in Martin in 1861 by Slovak political activists. 160 years ago, the memorandum required, among others, the recognition of the Slovaks as an independent political nation within Hungary, the creation of the Upper Hungarian Slovakia or Slovak Area, which would be managed by the Slovaks through their elected representatives, as well as the requirement to use the Slovak language in offices, courts, and schools. Similar solutions were found in the 2020 document. The signatories considered which solutions are necessary for maintaining and developing the Hungarian national minority. They called for the recognition of the Hungarian national community as “state-forming” in the preamble of the Slovak constitution and they demanded the free use of Hungarian national symbols “in every area of life.” The SMK called for the Hungarian language to become an equal language in areas inhabited by the Hungarian minority and for Hungarian cultural institutions and schools to receive more help. The authors of the document assured that “the boundaries of public administration should take into account existing natural regions” and they demanded more support for the economy in southern Slovakia. The memorandum states that Slovak-Hungarians could acquire the

Hungarian citizenship without losing its Slovak counterpart. The religious aspect was also mentioned, for example, the SMK politicians asked the Slovak government to support the Hungarian Catholic community's request to create a separate archdiocese. In addition, Zsolt Simon, chairman of the Hungarian Forum (MF), postulated in the social media the demand to change the preamble to the constitution from "We, the Slovak nation" to "We, citizens of the Slovak Republic". The SMK's proposal was criticized by the government coalition, but also by the Most-Híd. It was considered that reporting such far-reaching demands in the current economic situation (fighting a pandemic) is not recommended. In addition, attention was paid to the February election result, which indicated that the SMK did not represent the position of the entire Hungarian minority.

Conclusions. The situation of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and, as a consequence, the relations with Hungary constitute an important element of the internal and foreign policy of the government of Igor Matovič. Visits of influential Slovak politicians to Budapest in the recent weeks show that Hungary is perceived as a strategic partner for Slovakia. There is a desire to divert attention from controversial historical issues (Trianon) in favor of cooperation within the V4 and the Euro-Atlantic structures. The government coalition declares its desire to complete the work on the act on national minorities as soon as possible, which should be treated mainly as a nod to the Hungarians living in southern Slovakia. The extension of minority languages is also under consideration. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of this law in the government's program is caused by the desire to win the votes of the Hungarian minority in the future, but it is also aimed at counteracting Hungarian autonomous aspirations. A widely criticized memorandum should be considered mainly as the desire for attention from the currently marginal SMK.