

Slovak Experiences:

We, Intellectuals, Leave the Political Stage!?

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Life in Central and Eastern Europe is difficult, but fortunately short. It seems that we are expending most of our energy in order to demonstrate the truth of this Polish *bon mot*. We refuse to accept the indivisible character of human rights. Although we are able to advocate, either verbally or contractually, the concepts of equal opportunities, heterogeneity, pluralism and economic principles, we are still slaves of bipolar thinking in terms of winners and losers. We are constantly arguing and are not able to engage in a dialogue which would lead to a third, new set quality of attitudes and opinions resulting in a compromise satisfactory to all sides. We are still not able to accept "otherness" and to incorporate it into our being as a positive experience which adds new dimensions to our individual lives. Universal understanding of human rights is opposed to cultural relativism and this conflict moves through so-called territorial and national specifics into conflictual nationalism. Right-wing political parties have no money and left-wing parties have no new ideas and thus both of them are creating favorable conditions for nationalism.

Only four years ago we had a strong state and a weak society. Today we have successfully reached the stage of a weak state and a weak society. This alternative is one of the worst. Freedom fighters did not succeed in transforming themselves into freedom makers. Political parties and their leaders, crippled by their political and historical illiteracy, are skating from longing for an extreme nationalistic democracy to dreaming about a technocratic, innovative state. Instead of a revival of normal politics, which are supposed to serve the citizen, we are creating new and bizzare forms whose authors are the town intellectuals and technocrats. The new elite is becoming a "thing-it-itself" which refuses to reflect upon itself and upon the needs of citizens and society. The vertical structure of our

political life is characterized by new barking and fighting communities: new unsaturated elites, representatives of only a few segments of society; representatives of international communities and economic groups, like the mafia or the International Monetary Fund, etc.; and dissidents and former communist reformers, who are still in state structures and whose optimism is dysfunctional. The fiercest fight is taking place between the first two groups: the new elite and representatives of certain interest groups. Instead of building the state, these groups are entrapped in fighting and are professionally unable to sense the dangers to the democracy-to-be. These dangers are: elitist corporatism and cabinet policy; charismatic authoritarianism; political ignorance among citizens; suppression of the young upcoming technological generation of individual, independent specialists; a dangerous wave of rising expectations among the masses followed by economic collapse and the call for a "second revolution"; continual horizontal mobilisation within the state and vertical mobilisation in the state structures.

The paradox of decentralisation is also important. During this transition period this leads to corruption and to the misery of lacking financial support from the centre as well as the possibility to create funds. The regional autonomy of local governments is mainly limited to the area of taxes. With the added problem of high levels of unemployment, this can lead to the collapse of certain regions of Slovakia, followed by social riots and ethnic conflicts, for instance between Slovaks and Gypsies. The seeds of possible guerilla warfare are already sown in some regions; for example, Martin, Spisské Podhradie — Central and East Slovakia.

Bureaucratic structures and careerists are officially proclaiming their support of human rights, demonstrating their obscure institutionalized protection of the same to the gullible West. New, dangerous coalitions characterized by interests and conflicts are constantly recreated. The real threat to the citizen does not lie in the abstract state but in the power groups and mafias which function with the blessing of the government. It seems that a Western model applicable to the East does not now exist. We have to deal simultaneously with our internal threats and with an increasingly impatient West which fails to appreciate our predicament.

The chief problems of Eastern post-communist states are that they are not able to produce enough in order to satisfy the requirements of civic, social, minority and cultural rights and, last but not least, the right to private property. The violation of these basic rights threatens the political stability of this region. The loss of the political stability of this region may lead to another case of Yugoslavia.

This is the situation in my country as I see it. After the 1992 elections I was told by a young American journalist: "Those who won the previous elections in this country by 30 per cent and who lost it this time by less than 3 per cent are nothing but criminals." Was he cruel? Was he right?

These criminals were intellectuals, especially sociologists, writers and literary scientists. The November national euphoria made us believe that we had succeeded in the revolution and we did not even want to think about the collapse of the rotten regime which followed the collapse of the entire communist block. This euphoria disguised the very wide gap between intellectuals and "the people", which has traditionally existed for decades in Slovakia. The leaders of the revolution were unaware of the fear and uncertainty which arises from a suddenly open space. The last three generations of Slovaks have been living in a geographically, economically and politically closed space. This way of living, surviving, or as we used to say "vegetating", had certain positive aspects. The impossibility of understanding the complicated world, which puzzles and upsets most human beings, did not burden our existence. The lack of pluralistic understanding of the world simplified our thinking, offered cheap pseudo-solutions, linearized the pseudo-development of our society. Traditions and history were both pragmatically misused in order to legitimize those who needed to close that open space for the survival of their political existence. A system without external and internal initiatives and innovations could not recover, finally it reached its deadline and collapsed into itself. Our citizens were suddenly facing the eternity of the Universe, a complicated, incomprehensible world. Lacking religion, moral principles, historical continuity, they were suffering from culture shock.

The new way of life required feedback, action and interaction, anticipation, conflict prevention, learning. The citizen was required to change, to adjust to unknown economic, legislative, political and moral principles which do not accept cheap slogans and solutions or unquestioningly obey authoritative or charismatically lying personalities. The clearly defined borders of totalitarian existence disappeared and the puzzled citizen automatically began to search for the most achievable certainty. He was looking for his lost identity, searching for the authority which would have helped him to adjust to the new situation physically, emotionally and spiritually. He was looking for refuge in the face of uncertainty and new unknown dangers. He wanted to confirm his way of existence. He was trying to strengthen what we call "home". He was

looking for the community in which he could have shared his history, culture and fear.

Somewhere here lie the roots of the nationalistic feeling which offers the feeling of society within one's own clan, tribe or nation. Our citizens did not have their fate in their hand, and the intellectuals failed to understand that.

We failed to define our identity. We did not offer accessible solutions, manuals, since we were fighting unconsciously against our own fatal shortage of political knowledge. We were talking at the same time about both liberalism and conservatism, underestimating the role of trade unions and neglecting the creation of populist nationalistic parties. We were relying on a mutual understanding with our Czech friends who were also slowly becoming unrepresentative of their voters. Good relations between Slovak and Czech intellectuals did not reflect the relations between the two communities in general. At the same time these good relations did not help us to incorporate warnings and doubts. The most important tools and weapons of democracy — the massmedia — were left on their own, as were left communists in all structures of the state. We were used to attracting people's interest with words, attitudes and ideas, but no concrete action came afterwards, as we transferred our endless, interesting discussions into political life. The admiration of the West made us lose self-reflection and self-criticism. The lack of positive political programs and the openly presented doubts and theories of development lost us the allegiance of the voters too.

If we adopt the Latin understanding of intellectual *linter-legerel* we could say that the intellectual is the one who is able to differentiate. This differentiation is a sort of critical thinking. The intellectual should be able to recognize certain qualities in those in power, which are at odds with his moral principles, thus not allowing him to cooperate. He should clearly differentiate between the power which serves the people and the power which merely controls them. There is no type of state which likes this type of critical assessment. An intellectual complicates things more than necessary, many politicians say.

We, the intellectuals, lost the ability to question ourselves and our actions and thus we lost the critical identity which is incompatible with political practice. Our role was to persuade people how to react to the centres of power and to show that democracy should mean that the people control that power. This control requires support from those who are able to read between the lines, to understand and to express what goes unsaid, to signal when there is danger, to reveal invisible relations.

The sphere of politics demands practical behaviour. Making decisions requires a certain pragmatism and practical ability to reason. The intellectual entering politics embodies the critical attitude, knowledge and theoretical behaviour. This is in conflict with the needs of politics. It often happens that an intellectual losing his original identity becomes a boring moralist, passionate ideologist, funny Utopian or ideological dictator. These roles could be seen as a mirror image of his unpolitical past, supplemented often by frustrations.

By not recognizing our role, we failed to find a substitute for the lost illusions of Slovaks about themselves, their country and about us. In accepting power we lost the ability to reflect upon ourselves. The developments in my country have proved that intellectuals should have left politics in March 1990. Such was the thesis of my article published in that time of the first nationalistic movements in Slovakia.

Bratislava

