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# THE DANUBE REGION, 1989–2004: MOVING BETWEEN RUSSIA AND WESTERN EUROPE

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As a region that belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence before 1989, the Danube states have been largely treated in historical and political studies as a territory involved in the course of the Cold War. In the decades that have followed the fall of the Communist regimes in Europe, a considerable amount of research has been carried out analysing the political and economic transformations of these countries. A more limited focus, though, has been on the self-positioning of the Danube states in this period, as relating to the two important points of interest, the new emerging Russian federation and the European Community respectively. This paper focuses on the manner in which the Danube states have positioned themselves, through their foreign policy, in relation to the decaying Soviet Union and the emerging Russian Federation on one hand, and the European Community and NATO on the other.

The main attitude that drove their political discourse and orientation in the first decade after 1989 was that of “returning to Europe”, as seen in all the newly democratic states from Eastern Europe. A comparative case study focusing on Slovakia (taken as part of Czechoslovakia, and then as an independent study) and on Hungary can show how the discourse on “returning to Europe” was used in connection to Western Europe and their efforts to join the European Community and NATO, regardless of the particular nuances it may have shown at different times. Where Russia is concerned, these countries have tried to formulate a certain political direction so as to allow them to assure their own security and smoothly integrate into the Euro-Atlantic structures. I have structured the analysis on these two Danube states based on the public discourse of the most prominent political figures of the period and some press articles, as well as documents relating to the Euro-Atlantic institutions and expert works on the subject. The aim of this research is to point out the attitude each state has adopted towards the Euro-Atlantic structures and Russia, and the manner in which certain domestic circumstances have influenced this attitude.

## GENERAL REMARKS

The importance of the Danube River as a link, as a connector between people and places has always been acknowledged, from ancient times to the present. A scholar of the region described the Danube some years ago as “surrounded by a symbolic halo”, along which different people meet, cross each other and mingle (Magris, 1994: 23). Today, the river has been endowed not only with a cultural and spiritual significance, but also with an economic and political function as a means of transport and communication and a potential for development within the European continent. According to the *European Union Strategy for the Danube Region*, “The Danube Region is a functional area defined by its river basin. (...) Geographically it concerns primarily but not exclusively: Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Austria, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria within the EU, and Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the regions along the Danube) outside.” (European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, 2010: 3).

Nowadays, the term is used by the European Union to define an area that comprises both member states and prospective member states, having not solely a geographical or strong geopolitical significance, but rather a functional one, designed to further cooperation, interaction, stability and development. Consequently, the EU’s initiatives from the last few years have transformed the area into a Euro-region, opening the way for a great many opportunities for the present and the future. Where the EU is concerned, “the Danube region will be an opportunity to create a unified mechanism to push forward integration and enlargement policies, to use EU structural and cohesion funds in a more effective way and to achieve better results in terms of cohesion on the long run. It will also be an opportunity to bring together relevant legal obligations and commitments of the countries and eliminate superfluous or overlapping expectations.” (Busek and Gjoreska, 2010: 17).

## TWO DANUBIAN STATES: HUNGARY AND SLOVAKIA

The present paper will deal only with a narrow stretch belonging to the Danube Region, namely with Hungary and Slovakia. These two countries are geographically situated approximately in the centre of the region, neighbouring each other. Politically, they have both experienced similar conditions during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although their historical experiences in the long term may somewhat differ. In our

analysis, these two countries illustrate specific evolutions after 1989, in political and economical terms. As newly democratic countries, Hungary in 1989 and Slovakia in 1993, they were in the position of having to navigate a geopolitical context in which the two main centres of power were the Soviet Union/Russian Federation and Western Europe (that is the European Community and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation).

Although it is now considered by most specialists that the exits from Communism by Hungary and Czechoslovakia had a different character (Slovakia was in a confederation with the Czech Republic until December 31, 1992) (Huntington, 1991: 113-114; von Beyme, 1996: 28-29; Linz and Stepan, 1996), the efforts made by them during the first years of transition toward democracy had one goal: obtaining member status in the Euro-Atlantic structures and ensuring stability in their relation with the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. Both countries were strongly aware that the main actors in the new geopolitical context they found themselves in were the European Community and NATO in the West and the Soviet Union in the East, and therefore, their foreign policy was on the long term oriented towards them.

Although the two states share some similarities for the transition period after 1989, they cannot be treated together in a general analysis, but rather as comparative case studies. The similarities in their situation after 1989 were mostly determined by the previous shared experience of Communism and the provocations of recently becoming independent: the legacies of Communism; social and economic problems; the need to establish good relations with their immediate neighbours; the concern towards the evolution of the situation in the Soviet Union and then the need to establish good relations with the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Newly Independent States; and especially the objective of re-establishing close relations with Western Europe and the United States, and obtaining membership in the European Community and NATO. The manner in which each state responded to domestic and external challenges greatly varied, and this decisively influenced their relations with Russia and the EC/EU and NATO. As an example, at the end of 1992, Hungary was perceived as a politically stable country on the road to economic recovery, while Czechoslovakia was characterised by constant ruptures on politic and ethnic grounds on a background of economic recession and pending official cessation of existence by the end of the year (Lhomel and Schreiber, 1993).

The main objective the first democratic representatives declared for both countries in 1989 was that of 'returning to Europe', of asserting their European values,

traditions and culture (Havel, January 1, 1990; Antall, July 7, 1990). But the Europe they referred to was the Euro-Atlantic one, the political and economic structures of the European Community and the military structures of NATO, since they could not envisage political stability and economic recovery for their countries without security guarantees for the region. Where the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation, was concerned, they had a cautious attitude in the beginning, as they bore in mind the past experiences of their short lived outbursts of sovereignty, but as they witnessed the decay and implosion of the Soviet Union they tried to assure the new Russian Federation that their efforts to obtain member status in the Euro-Atlantic institutions were not directed against it, nor did they jeopardise the European balance of military power (Antall, October 28, 1991; Langsford and Tashev, 2005: 240-43).

### **CASE STUDY: HUNGARY**

As one of the former Communist states, Hungary asserted its European values and culture decades before 1989 (see Szűcz, 2000 [1983]; Konrád, 1984). Then, it was merely a discourse of the underground intellectual circles, directed against the totalitarian regime. After 1989 though, all public speeches and documents became profusely impregnated with the use of a 'European' terminology: 'Europe', 'European values and norms', 'European Community' (then 'European Union'), 'European structures', etc. All efforts and measures taken were aimed at improving the external circumstances of the state and achieving the most important objective: membership in the EC/EU and NATO (Antall, November 19, 1990).

The high frequency in terminology referring to Europe (in all its understandings) is obvious in the speeches of the Hungarian prime ministers. In the speeches of the first democratically-elected prime minister after 1989, József Antall (in office from May 23, 1990 to December 12, 1993), the objective of obtaining association status, then member status within the European Community/European Union is constantly expressed: 'implement the most highly developed European values and norms', 'a new Europe which is unified in political, economic, cultural, humanitarian and legal affairs', 'a new structure and institutional framework for all-European security and co-operation that reflects the new circumstances', 'existing European organisations', 'all-European', 'a broad European military, security and political structure', 'the process of forging European unity', 'the process of European integration', 'adherence to the principles of the OSCE and to all West European norms', 'the most highly

developed European practice and norms’, ‘our earliest possible accession to the developed Europe’ (Antall, July 7, 1990); ‘the common European effort’, ‘[Hungary’s] road back to Europe’, ‘Hungary’s integration into the European system of political, social and legal standards’, ‘fully integrated into the European Community in both political and economic terms’ (Antall, November 19, 1990); ‘time-tested European structures, such as NATO, the European Union and the Council of Europe, are pillars of European security and stability’, ‘a united and stable Europe’ (Antall, October 1, 1991); ‘We are committed to European integration.’ (Antall, October 28, 1991); ‘we do everything possible to adjust to the norms of the European Community’ (Antall, May 6, 1992); ‘the reintegration into Europe’, ‘greater Europe’, ‘a chance to integrate into Europe’, ‘within the framework of European unity’ (Antall, June 6, 1992); ‘Europe is not merely a geographical concept. It is not simply the name of the continent where Hungary is among the countries to be found on the map as one moves in from its perimeters.’, ‘integrating into the political, security and economic system of the new Europe’, ‘Our integration into Europe is taking place along several lines at once.’, ‘We want to prepare ourselves for membership.’ (Antall, June 24, 1992 a); ‘The issue of Europe, the vision of a United States of Europe, the definition of the boundaries of Europe are also on the agenda of this session. When talking about Europe, we take Europe as a broad concept embracing vast areas in a geographical, cultural and political sense, but first and foremost in terms of security.’, ‘Our Europe is defined by these three factors: geographical, human, and cultural—the last one encompassing and conveying mentality. This mentality, this capacity for renewal, is without parallel in the history of the great civilisations.’, ‘our common heritage’, ‘give fresh impetus to our Europe’, ‘up a modern European framework of institutions’, ‘our Europe’ (Antall, June 24, 1992 b); ‘Hungary tried to move towards European integration and win associate membership of the European Community.’ (Antall, May 19, 1993); ‘Our most important aim is to achieve accession to the European Union and NATO within this decade.’, ‘There is no other option for Hungary but accession to the European Union; its advantages eclipse all disadvantages—disadvantages mostly resulting from not achieving full EU membership.’ (Antall, July 20, 1993).

An interesting aspect in József Antall’s texts is that up to the second half of 1991 there was much reference to Europe by stressing the common values, traditions, and the need to accept the new democratic states from East-Central Europe within the Euro-Atlantic structures. This reflects the uncertainty the former Communist states,

including Hungary, had about their rapid integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures and that they were using every opportunity to convince Western Europe about their common values and culture. But after the signing of the Association Agreement to the European Union in November 1991, there is frequent use of the expression 'our Europe' as a means to reflect their success in the negotiations with the European institutions, but also that they had been accepted by Western Europe as Europeans.

The pro-European orientation of Hungarian foreign policy is thus obvious, and this tendency is reflected in most official discourses. This trend is continued by József Antall's successors in the office of prime minister, regardless of their political orientation. Prime minister Péter Boross (in office from December 12, 1993 to July 15, 1994) officially transmitted Hungary's application for accession to the European Union on March 31, 1994, considering his country ready to undertake all measures needed to fully integrate into this structure (Application for Membership of the European Union by the Republic of Hungary, 1994). The following period, especially that starting with the opening of negotiations in 1998, was marked by a strong pro-European discourse. The support for this came both from the civil society ("The Future of Hungary is Inextricably Intertwined with the Future of the European Union", 2002) and the political parties (Joint Statement of the Parties represented in the National Assembly, 2000).

Although integration within the European institutions was emphasized on every occasion as Hungary's main objective, this was unconceivable without integrating into NATO structures. This fact can be also found in Antall's speeches at the beginning of the 1990s: 'Hungary is actively engaged in studying the proposals pertaining to a broad European military, security and political structure.', 'a new, broad, pan-European security system', 'it is expedient to rely on stable Atlantic co-operation, which proved in the course of two world wars that Europe and North America are inseparable' (Antall, July 7, 1990); 'I must say that European integration is inconceivable without transatlantic co-operation. Two world wars prove, even if certain NATO members had opposed one another then, that the marked presence of the United States and Canada is vital for European security. NATO is the cornerstone of European stability for us. Although we highly esteem international agreements, Helsinki and the CSCE, still we regard NATO as the effective security organisation.', 'The region (...) is also extremely important for NATO from a security aspect. It is enough to consider that the 275 south-eastern wing of NATO.', 'our commitment to European unity, a unity which cannot be separated

from the Atlantic idea' (Antall, October 28, 1991); 'Atlanticism is an integral part of the modern European outlook, co-operation and exchange of ideas. To accomplish the unity of Europe with Atlanticism in the West and co-operation with the Eurasian region are objectives to be achieved in conjunction.', 'the need for the continued existence of NATO and the importance of the presence of the United States.' (Antall, June 24, 1992 b); 'Stability and security can only be expected to reign in Europe if we manage to bring about the stabilisation of the democratic systems' (Antall, July 9, 1992); 'We must declare that given the various aspects of European security, it is very important to maintain NATO and the political and military presence of the United States in Europe.' (Antall, July 18, 1992); 'There cannot be a European security system without the participation of the United States, its presence in Europe, the maintenance and modernisation of NATO, and in connection with NATO, the development of a European defence system.' (Antall, October 2, 1992); 'We consider the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to be the basis of European security. NATO is one of the elements which guarantee international peace and the balance of European security.' (Antall, May 19, 1993); 'the Hungarian government's commitment to the Atlantic idea and to NATO is nothing new, NATO continues to bear responsibility, and it should continue to remain the most important political and military stabilising factor.', 'NATO is the contemporary embodiment of transatlantic co-operation. NATO is destined to be a stabilising factor' (Antall, June 3, 1993); 'We intend to expand relations between NATO in this region to as broad an extent as possible under the prevailing circumstances.' (Antall, July 17, 1993). This has a double significance: on one hand, Hungary, like all the other former Communist countries, was striving to obtain military and security guarantees from NATO in respect to the stability of the region in order to concentrate on its domestic economic development; on the other, NATO was seen around the mid-1990s as the way to EU membership.

Although there was this inseparable relation established between accession to the EU and accession to NATO, it is rather obvious that from 1994 (the year the Association Agreement to the EU had entered into force) to 1999 (the year Hungary officially became a member of NATO) there was a higher concentration on the problems concerning NATO membership (Lansford and Tashev, 242-43), even though the issues associated with the EU negotiations did not lose their importance.

Where Hungary's diplomatic relations with Russia are concerned, foreign policy has tried to represent a neutral attitude, cautious in the times of the Soviet Union, helpful during the latter's implosion, and lacking bad intentions during its negotiations

with the EU and NATO. Therefore, foreign policy tried to simultaneously offer help to the Russian government with their domestic problems and assure it that Hungary's EU and NATO membership was under no circumstances directed against her: 'We do not wish to exclude the peoples of the Soviet Union from the unified Europe.' (Antall, July 7, 1990); 'A peaceful way of ensuring internal change and democratisation in the Soviet Union is in our fundamental interest.' (Antall, October 28, 1991); 'One thing we must certainly all accept is that Russia, whatever its political system, is among the great powers in Europe, indeed in Eurasia. And Russia always has its own aims, its own traditions, and its resources. Russia will always remain a leading force to be reckoned with, even if it is suffering from a serious illness today.' (Antall, June 6, 1992). The overall relationship with Russia was, therefore, leading to 'friendly and, to a certain extent, potentially allied relations with the forces involved in reform policies' (Antall, July 20, 1993). Hungary developed a good relationship with Russia at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s.

In conclusion, the main objectives that Hungary promoted during the period 1989–2004 were EU and NATO membership, although in the mid-1990s more energy was directed towards the latter. Towards Russia it had a neutral attitude, a diplomatic friendship meant to secure stability in the region and efficient cooperation.

### **CASE STUDY: SLOVAKIA**

Since Slovakia was part of the new Czechoslovakia from 1989 until 1993, when it became sovereign, it expressed a common foreign policy in line with the Czech Republic. During the Czechoslovak confederation, the expressions of Europeanness made by President Vaclav Havel or the prime ministers were in common spirit (Havel, January 1, 1990; Havel, January 25, 1990).

After 1993, there were two main directions in Slovakia's foreign policy: the period of Vladimír Mečiar, prime minister from 1993 to 1998 (previously prime minister of Slovakia within Czechoslovakia, 1990–91 and 1992–93) and of Mikuláš Dzurinda, in office from 1998 to 2006. Due to the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Confederation and the economic recession in which Slovakia found itself, it soon became clear that it would not be among the first states to negotiate with the EU and NATO (Duleba, 8). The orientation of Slovakia's foreign policy towards the Euro-Atlantic structures and then its reorientation towards Russia after 1995 is also reflected in the newspapers of the period, internal and external.



In the first years of Mečiar's government, the main objective asserted is that of the EU and NATO (Jagodzinski, January 23, 1995). But confronted with a rather distant attitude coming from the EU and NATO, Mečiar started to consider relations with Russia as an alternative (Duleba: 8). Thus, the pro-European attitude is consequently toned down, as Mečiar searches for a way 'that means not entering the East, but neither the West' (Grendel, December 10–11, 1994). Although he officially transmitted Slovakia's application to the EU in 1995, the previous negotiations with NATO revealed that in the following years there would be no possibility of his country obtaining membership. He therefore redirected the foreign policy of Slovakia towards Russia, the other power able and, under some conditions, willing to offer security guarantees. In March 1995, Mečiar was already stating, during the Russian prime minister's visit in Slovakia, that 'if we are not wanted in the West, we are going East' and that he was willing to establish 'a new type of relationship with Russia' (Jagodzinski, March 2, 1995). But the foreign policy that Mečiar had conducted from 1995 up to 1998 was double-faced: on the one hand, he continued negotiations with the Euro-Atlantic institutions, despite the tense relations between the sides since in his own words, 'We are strategically important to the EU', while on the other hand he strengthened Slovakia's links with Russia, ensuring some security and economic guarantees (Lewis, November 8, 1995).

This situation continued until 1998, marked by tensions with the EU and NATO (for example, with the occasion of a referendum organised in 1997 on the issue of NATO accession) and the increase in the number of economic treaties signed with Russia. Meanwhile, the relationship with the Euro-Atlantic structures was rapidly decaying during these years and there seemed to be a very long journey for Slovakia to Europe (Palko, August 28, 1996; Dorotková, November 6, 1996). But with Mečiar's exit from power in 1998, Mikuláš Dzurinda's government put things back on the right track.

The pro-European discourse reappeared clearly in the press and the official texts. Contrary to Mečiar's rhetoric, which argued with the representatives of both NATO and EU concerning the conditions and calendar of Slovakia's membership, Dzurinda stressed from the beginning the need to comply with the set criteria and obtain full membership in the near future, so the new Government sought to adapt all aspects of the state to the standards demanded (Pavčová, September 14, 1998). Dzurinda was aware of the situation in which Slovakia was and was determined to take all measures

in order to obtain Euro-Atlantic accession: 'Slovakia has lost a lot of time over the last four years, which, however, could just mean that we need to accelerate our conceptual work to catch up on what we have missed.', 'The Policy Statement shows the importance of the Slovak Republics integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.', 'The preparation of state administration and the population for European integration is no less important for the integration process in Slovakia.' (Dzurinda, July 24, 1999); 'Slovakia wished to become a member of the OECD, NATO, and the EU' (Dzurinda, October 24, 2002); 'priorities of the Government: accession to EU and NATO (Dzurinda, February 10, 2003).

Slovakia's relationship with Russia during the Dzurinda government was constructed on the existing agreements from Mečiar's time. Although from 1998 to 2001 the relations with Russia were considerably diminished, since all attention was focused on Euro-Atlantic membership, they they returned as Slovakia needed no opposition from Russia in achieving its objective (Duleba: 9). After 2004, one of the main priorities for Slovakia became its relationship with Russia and Ukraine.

Overall, Slovakia had quite a complicated relationship, both with the Euro-Atlantic structures and with Russia. Although there existed a constant European discourse, it was not as prominent as in the case of other states, such as Hungary. The attitude towards Russia was not of a neutral friend, but more of an interested partner that sought to find an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration.

## CONCLUSIONS

The two states presented above illustrate two different attitudes towards the geopolitical conditions that existed in Central Europe after 1989. While Hungary constructed a clear and constant direction towards Euro-Atlantic integration, expressed already in the speeches of its first freely elected prime minister, József Antall, and continued by the successor politicians, Slovakia had a tense and difficult relationship with both the EU and NATO due to the confrontational and nationalistic behaviour of Vladimír Mečiar. In Slovakia, a pro-European discourse was properly used only in the times of Mikuláš Dzurinda, hence after 1998.

The way in which the two states regarded themselves in relation to the Soviet Union/Russian Federation is also different. Hungary saw Russia as a state they needed to have good relations with in order to ensure stability in the region and not create obstacles in its way towards Euro-Atlantic membership. Slovakia on the

other hand used the relations with Russia to obtain economic advantages, securities and guarantees that could not be obtained from the EU and NATO due to Mečiar's attitude. But once the government changed, the objective of Euro-Atlantic integration took precedence.

To sum up, both Hungary and Slovakia considered that achieving full member status within the EU and NATO was their priority. The evolution of these relations influenced the type of dialogue they had with Russia, neutral or close.

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