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#### **Administrative Reform and the Minority Problem**

##### **The Slovak administrative reform and the plan of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition**

From an administrative aspect, the history of Czechoslovakia, existing for 74 years altogether, and Slovakia, independent since 1993, can be perceived as the history of permanent reforms. This is explained only in part by the peculiar circumstances among which the Czechoslovak state was formed and renewed in 1918 and then in 1945. The main breakpoint was constituted by the Sudeten German, Hungarian, and Ruthenian minority issues and the Moravian and Ruthenian 'provincial' issues which had been in a marked conflict with the inherited Austrian provincial and the pre-1918 Hungarian county system before 1938. The Czechoslovak idea of state was considering basically centralised state and administrative formulae in the spirit of the idea of the Czechoslovak national unity. This tendency became more pronounced during the decades of the communist party-state.

##### **Counties, provinces, regions, districts**

Eight radical reforms were carried out in the twentieth century administrative divisions of the territory of Slovakia subsequent to 1918: the Hungarian counties which became part of Czechoslovakia were drawn together into 16 counties in 1919. These were further concentrated into six great counties in 1923. Five years later, in 1928, the provincial system was created in the framework of the administrative reform encompassing the whole of Czechoslovakia. In this, Slovakia and Ruthenia—beside the conservation of the districts inherited with the county system—appeared as independent provinces.

In 1940, the great counties returned with the first Slovak Republic proclaimed on March 14, 1939, while the parts regained by Hungary were arranged within ten Hungarian counties and with in these, to twenty four districts. After World War II, or rather, the communist take over of the power, Slovakia was divided into six (in 1949) and then into three regions in 1960. In the framework of the Czech–Slovak Federation, effective after January 1, 1969, Bratislava city—as the capital of the Slovak member republic of the federation—was endowed with the status of a region. After the temporary elimination of regions, 3+1 regions were created in the 1971–1990 period. The number of districts was reduced by two thirds during the 1960 reform and thus, the number of districts of Hungarian majority decreased from fourteen to two in the Hungarian regions of southern Slovakia. After the changes of 1989, the previous regions ceased to exist after January 1991: the great counties formed in 1960 survived but there were 121 divisions created within them. There was a Hungarian majority in 17 of these.

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On the basis of Law no. 221/1996 elaborated by the third Mečiar government and passed by the Parliament on July 3, 1996—after having rejected the comments of President Michal Kováč—Slovakia was divided into 8 administrative regions and 79 districts. However, the creation of the municipality regions was not placed on the agenda.<sup>1</sup> When explaining the territorial solutions of the administrative reform, Prime Minister Mečiar repeatedly and openly referred to its ethno-political intentions and consequences. It was regarded to be a significant aspect of the reform to divide the territories of Hungarian majority in a way that—quoting the statement of Mečiar delivered in the television on April 26, 1996—“this would prevent any kind of Hungarian aspiration to autonomy once and for all.”

Without the consent of those living in the affected administrative regions, the number of districts to which settlements with a Hungarian population of more than 20% belonged, increased from 13 to 18. (Only two districts of this kind were added to the Poltár district and one to the Aranyosmarót (Zlaté Moravce) district.)

We are talking about the following districts (in parenthesis: the proportion of Hungarians and the number of villages with a Hungarian population of more than 20%):

Dunaszerdahely (Dunajská Streda) (87,25–66)	Komárom (Komárno) (74,2%–37)
Rimaszombat (Rimavská Sobota) (44,3–72)	Galánta (Galanta) (41,7%–21)
Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky) (41,5%–35)	Vágsellye (Šafa) (40,2%–11)
Rozsnyó (Rožňava) (36,3–32)	Töketerebes (Trebíšov) (33 %–38)
Léva (Levice) (31,6%–53)	Losonc (Lucenec) (30,9%–26)
Nagykürtös (Veľký Krtíš) (30,7%–31)	Nagyőrce (Revúca) (24,6%–16)
Szenc (Senec) (23,8%–15)	Kassa (Košice) region (16,4%–24)
Nagyimihály (Michalovce) (13,2%–17)	Nyitra (Nitra) (8,2%–15) <sup>2</sup>

This regional and district arrangement in numerous cases corresponds completely to the phenomenon known as *gerrymandering* in administrative geography. It means that those in power ignore the natural characteristics of the territory to be divided for the sake of their own political purposes. They carry out the division according to their own interests of power in the crucial cases in an arbitrary manner forgetting about the criteria enforced at other parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the history of the administrative reforms in 20<sup>th</sup> century see Kocsis, Károly, *Közigazgatási változások Szlovákiában* [Administrative changes in Slovakia]. *Regio* (6) 1995. 4. pp. 29-59; Klimko, Jozef, *Vývoj územia Slovenska a utváranie jeho hraníc*. Obzor, Bratislava, 1980; Duray Miklós, Kvarda, József, and Oriskó, Norbert, *Az etnokratikus nemzetállam és demokratik ellenszere* [Democratic remedy for the ethnocratic nation state]. In: Duray Miklós, *Önrendelkezési kísérleteink* [Our attempts to self-government]. Méry Ratio, Somorja, 1999. pp. 257-298; Bakker, Edwin, *Minority Conflict in Slovakia and Hungary?* Labyrinth Publication, AR Capelle a/d IJssel, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> On the ratios and settlement figures of the Hungarian minority in the districts created in conformity with the administrative reform of Mečiar, see Lanstyák, István, *A magyar nyelv Szlovákiában* [Hungarian Language in Slovakia]. Osiris–Kalligram–MTA Kisebbségkutató Műhely, Budapest–Pozsony, 2000. p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Bakker, Edwin, *op. cit.* pp. 105–107.

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#### The reform strategy of the Dzurinda cabinet

The new Slovak government formed in October 1998 and led by Mikuláš Dzurinda, ranked the administrative reform as a prominent issue of its program: the Dzurinda cabinet initiated the creation of legislative guarantees for local and regional self-government in the framework of a complex administrative reform. This wanted to transfer a significant part of the jurisdiction of the public administration to the municipalities and, at the same time, get rid of the districts formed during the administrative reform of Mečiar and create 12 counties instead of the 8 regions.<sup>4</sup>

In the following sections, I will examine the administrative reform undertaken in the program of the Dzurinda cabinet and prepared as a strategic program by August 1999, with respect to what influence the political debates concerning it had on the southern Slovak regions inhabited by Hungarians. The analysis stretches from the resolutions of June 2000 of the Slovak government until the adoption of the bills at the extraordinary cabinet meeting on April 1, 2001.<sup>5</sup>

In November 1998, the Dzurinda cabinet trusted one of the representatives of the Democratic Party (DS) of the governing coalition, Viktor Nižňanský, in the rank of government commissioner, with the preparation of the administrative reform. Soon, Nižňanský set up his own group of experts, which made intensive preparations for the drawing up of a reform bill that would keep to the fore—beside the experiences of the administrative reforms of Slovakia—also the practice of the Western European states and the expectations of the European Union. Two principles were formulated with respect to the administrative reform in the strategic material of the reform exactly on the basis of these latter, Western European and EU requirements: ‘ 1) There is a process of gradual restriction concerning the sovereignty of the nation-state, on the one hand, due to the content of the Treaty of the European Union and, on the other, by the possibility of intervention into internal affairs and legal systems. For this reason, it is necessary for the administrative bodies to be able to execute the international obligations in the spirit of the integration endeavours of the Slovak Republic (...) 2) A process of regionalisation is on its way which is the next step of integration, a reaction against nationalism. And at the same time, also the answer for the crisis of the modern State and the issue of new sources of development.’<sup>6</sup>

The harmonization of the principles, aims, and instruments laid down in the strategic material was the task of Ivan Mikloš, Deputy Prime Minister for the Economy. The fact that certain elements of the reform are 1-1,5 years late as compared to the originally

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<sup>4</sup> Vládny program vlády Mikuláša Dzurindu z roku 1998. [www.government.gov.sk](http://www.government.gov.sk); (The printed version of the Internet sources can be found in the Archives of the Minority Studies Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). Szarka, László, A szlovákiai Magyar Koalíció Pártjának kormányzati szerepvállalásáról [On the government participation of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition]. *Regio* (11) 2000. 4. pp. 122–149.

<sup>5</sup> The strategic material appeared also in a Hungarian-Slovak bilingual version: Neszméri, Sándor (Ed.), *A Szlovák Köztársaság közigazgatási reformjának stratégiája—Stratégia reformy verejnej správy v Slovenskej republike* [Administrative reform strategy of the Slovak Republic] A Demokratikus és Nyitott Társadalomért Társulás, Somorja, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 4–5.

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defined plans of implementation could raise the question first of all of his political responsibility. This, however, as we will see later on, would be a much over-simplified conclusion. For example, it was in vain to plan on reaching an agreement among the members of the governing coalition by the end of 1999 the latest on one of the most delicate points of the whole reform—namely, the marking out of the borders of the new administrative units and ‘the definition of the new territorial and administrative structure of the Slovak Republic.’ The reason for this can be found in the fact that the entire reform process was dominated by the rivalry among the coalition partners and the emphasis on partisan interests. The following five factors could be found in the background of partisan rivalry:

- a) insisting on the decentralisation of the competences of the state vs. restraining it;
- b) concerns in connection to the growing jurisdiction of local and regional municipalities owing to the loss of importance of party politics;
- c) fear of losing the voters in the countryside due to the planned elimination of the districts created with the reform of Mečiar;
- d) the acceleration of the process of regionalisation caused by the administrative reform might involve the realisation of the homogeneous nation-state concept in danger;
- e) the municipalities and municipal associations of the 435 settlements of southern Slovakia of Hungarian majority might develop into a territorial autonomy based on ethnicity.

Thus, on the one hand, the Dzurinda cabinet carried out the necessary steps of organisation, coordination, information policy, and codification but, on the other hand, significant differences of opinion were revealed among the members of the new coalition already at the first specific preparatory negotiation. For example, the developments of 1999 spent in the spirit of preparations, made it clear that the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) and the Party of Civil Understanding (SOP) wanted to prevent the radical modification of the reform of Mečiar (8 regions and 79 districts), for the leaders of both of the parties feared that the majority of their voters would not agree with these changes. First, they were concerned about their local administrative positions and second, they worried, and with a good reason, that—among other problems—their supporters living in the western and eastern electoral districts of Slovakia would turn away from them for good (according to the electoral map of Slovakia, the nationalist opposition parties dominate northwest and central Slovakia, while the voters of the Hungarian Coalition are from southern Slovakia).

The Dzurinda cabinet came to face the reserved behaviour of the leftist coalition partners in January 2000 for the first time, when the discussion of the reform idea had to be postponed with three months mostly because of the two parties. The material of the draft accepted in April contained the specification of those spheres of authority which the public administration had to transfer to the municipalities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Reforma verejnej správy. Home page of President Mikuláš Dzurinda: [www.government.gov.sk](http://www.government.gov.sk)

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Commissioner Viktor Nižňanský finished his draft, which demanded a symmetric model of 12 public administration and 12 municipal counties, by June 2000. The government adopted it in August 2000 and decided about the instruments it would make available for the office of Deputy Prime Minister Mikloš for the realisation of the scheme. Thereafter, the government dealt with various details of the administrative reform almost every month: the financing of the reform; the clarification of the situation of the capital and Kassa under public law; the inevitable modification of the schedule of the reform; the harmonization of the necessary amendments, etc.

In the meanwhile, bitter political struggle started among the political parties with the above-mentioned main points constituting the basis of the debate. The party foundation of Prime Minister Dzurinda in 2000 and the two leftist parties' more and more frequently differing paths and glances toward the opposition parties, brought about much tension within the coalition. Due to the 'whipping boy' role intended for the SMK, nationalism gained ground again in the common talk of Slovakia. All these factors made the work of the supporters of the reform increasingly difficult with every week. Somewhat unexpectedly but surely not without reason and antecedents, Prime Minister Dzurinda was compelled to establish a party in the summer of 2000. All of the parties of the coalition—even the former party of Dzurinda, the Christian Democratic Movement, the strongest party of the governing coalition, the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK)—expressed their determination in a very clear-cut manner: they wanted to focus on the interests of the original parties and would not want to sustain the SDK. The reason for this was that they considered the SDK a temporary coalition for the elections which was forced to be established by the 1998 electoral law of Mečiar.

There is a lot at stake in the foreign affairs field with regard to the administrative reform. Slovakia, and first of all the Dzurinda cabinet, is floating toward a more and more difficult position in the integration policy arena given that also the reform of the administration (beside the passing of the minority language law) figures among the conditions of the successful continuation of accession talks. From this respect, the amendment of 2000 to the 1999 Slovak Constitution is of great significance for it created the previously lacking constitutional background of the administrative reform.

It would be worth dedicating a separate analysis to the question what reasons contributed to the fact that the opposition parties made every-co-ordinated-effort to use the two-week-long constitutional debate of February 2001 as an opportunity for base-toned criticism of the politics of the SMK which came close to making the political representation of the Hungarian minority and the governmental participation of the SMK impossible.

It became clear already during the 'half-time' self-assessment of the Dzurinda cabinet in the autumn of 2000 that the two leftist parties of the governing coalition wished to render their 'sinking' ship attractive and convincing in the eyes of the opposition parties and the Slovak public opinion of strong anti-minority feelings with playing down the SMK and sabotaging the governmental priorities of the party of the Hungarian minority. The opposition's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) led by Vladimír Mečiar and the Slovak National Party (SNS) led by Anna Malíková seized the opportu-

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nity when the anti-HCD forces of the coalition offered themselves and, hoping that the leftists would desert, launched rude anti-Hungarian attacks in order to try to create a new situation in the Parliament for the whole governing coalition.

Thus, the anti-Hungarian attacks can be reinterpreted within the context of a comprehensive process of domestic politics. The main targets of the political criticism were, naturally, the most important Hungarian claims in connection to the administrative reform: preventing the division of the regions inhabited by Hungarians and guaranteeing the proper Hungarian ratio in the municipal electoral districts. The most frequent accusation against the Hungarian ideas was that they tried to enforce the ethnic principle aggressively. And all this in spite of the fact that the SMK emphasized that the same principles should be applied in case of the regions of Csallóköz (Žitný ostrov) and Mátyusföld, Gömör (Gemér), Bodrogköz (Medzibodrocko), and the Ung region that were used for marking out the Slovak regions of Árva (Orava), Liptó and the Szepesség (Spiš region). The first ones formed natural geographic and ethno-cultural units similarly to the latter ones. The whole Slovak public opinion was overcome with the anti-Hungarian worries. Štefan Hríb, editor in chief of the political weekly entitled *Domino* criticized the situation with a courage similar only to that of political scientist Miroslav Kusý, political advisor of Pál Csáky deputy prime minister who was the only one in the past years' political journalism to express such opinions: 'And the government does not allow the formation of Komárom county and the creation of other counties inhabited by a Hungarian majority. It prefers to let them live in the territories stigmatised by the xenophobia of Mečiar for then the "perilous minority" would remain in a secure minority everywhere. (...) The coalition critics of Komárom county are against its formation because they reject the ethnic aspects. However, if we look at the map of country planning, we can ascertain at once that it was exactly the politicians of Slovakia who were driven by the ethnic principle when they created the north-south direction of the Nyitra and Nagyszombat (Trnava) county. For it was possible to avoid the majority of the minority in the counties only with this. Yes, Mečiar created this. However, the current government follows this faithfully.'<sup>8</sup>

The attacks against Komárom county, planned to be formed from the regions of Csallóköz and Mátyusföld that were of a Hungarian majority, became perceivable to everybody and supported by the majority of the Slovak political public opinion through a general outcry and refusal. Within the governing coalition, only the representatives of the Democratic Party were willing to support the ideas of the SMK: Peter Zajac, who has

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<sup>8</sup> The author criticises both the portrayal of Hungarians as enemies which characterises Slovak politics even today and the political 'capitalists' who profit from it, and attributes the common roots of hungarophobia to the unprocessed residues of Trianon: 'Our Hungarians had to acquiesce in the loss of their homeland after Trianon. From the prospect of 80 years, we can say that they did. However, the Slovaks did not. The majority still cannot understand the situation of the Hungarians. As if they felt that Trianon awarded to Slovakia also what was not its due. As if they still did not feel confident enough, as if this made them hide their fear behind some childish display of their power. Today, Trianon is an anxiety not in the Hungarian but much more in the Slovak heads.' Hríb, Štefan, *Ahol a kicsinyesség az úr* [Where narrow-mindedness reigns]. *Új Szó*. March 20, 2001. p. 2.

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resigned his seat in the Parliament since then, Ján Lángoš who was constrained to give up his office of the President of the party, and František Šebej, Head of the Parliament's Committee for EU Accession. However, also the Democratic Party member Viktor Nižňanský, Commissioner for the administrative reform, distanced himself on several occasions from the SMK plan aiming at the formation of an independent county from the Hungarian regions.

#### **The administrative reform of the SMK**

In the next paragraphs, I will try to find an answer to the question whether or not the communication and negotiation strategies chosen by the SMK were indeed inadequate when it tried to create a Hungarian united front in support of the 13<sup>th</sup> county, Komárom county of Hungarian majority.

The precursors of the Hungarian Coalition Party—the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement, the Co-existence Political Movement, and the Hungarian Civic Party—managed more or less to develop a common standpoint in the fundamental questions of the administrative reform process in Slovakia before their union in 1998. As opposed to the first reform bill elaborated by the second Mečiar cabinet, all three of the Hungarian parties would have wanted to endorse such an administrative reform, in which there would have been a guarantee for the regional self-government of the regions of Hungarian majority of southern Slovakia. As the Hungarian parties received no support in this regard from any of the Slovak parties or any other political force, they organized the national congress of the elected representatives and mayors of Hungarian nationality in Komárom on January 8, 1994. The congress adopted four position papers, among them one on the administrative and territorial reorganization of Slovakia.

Naturally, the three Hungarian minority parties took a common stand in rejecting the administrative reform of Mečiar in 1996. During the coalition negotiations subsequent to the parliamentary elections of September 1998, the delegation of the SMK made a promise to fulfil three preconditions as requested by the SDL. According to this, the SMK renounced in its political program during the four-year-long term of the government even the possibility of mentioning the supervision of the Beneš decrees, the foundation of an independent Hungarian university, and the territorial autonomy of ethnic basis. It has occurred many times whether or not it was wise to accept these conditions of national-populist origin without receiving anything in exchange. Or, should the SMK have squeezed out a promise exactly in the issue of regional municipalities entailing a coalition support for the creation of an independent administrative unit for the Hungarian minority of almost 3000 persons in southern Slovakia (Csallóköz, Mátyusföld, Garam (Hron) region). These political struggles in connection to the administrative reform might seem rather disillusioning with regard to the assumptions made subsequent to the events. However, these are quite far both from the realities and possibilities of the period after the 1998 elections. Just as far away as the SMK was forced to drift from the political world of ideas set forth in the position statements of Komárom.

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It is not hungarofobia, characteristic of the Slovak public opinion shapers and the thinking of the majority of politicians, that we have to see behind this certainly contradictory or, I would rather say, negative process. In reality, it is the administrative reforms and self-government aspirations within a given State that make up those elements of the regionalisation processes of Central and Easter-Europe, which are the most difficult ones to carry out but, at the same time, are of a minor importance with respect to the whole process. In the short and 'mid-long' run, it seems more important to fulfil the political, cultural, and mass psychology criteria necessary for the adoption, accommodation, and application of the regional development policy of the EU. As a part of this, neither the issue of special linguistic and cultural traits nor that of the self-government ambitions of compact ethnic regions can be ignored any more. Especially not if they form the central element of the political programs of the given minority communities.

Similarly, also the forms of regional co-operation became impossible to elude in the border regions. It is not possible or at least not worth making absolute such internal regional municipal systems which are contrary to the endeavours aiming at the revitalisation of historic and economic regions which have been split and sentenced to a peripheral existence for decades. This renders difficult both the formation of the euroregions and the access to the regional development funds.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, it is very important that the SMK had the power and attention beyond the mud wrestling of party politics to initiate such a complex regional work of analysis, which could, in the long run, lay the foundations of the party's regional development schemes for southern Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> The report of the analyser group led by József Berényi indicate that those territories constitute the 'southern region' of Slovakia, which 'belong to the Slovak-Hungarian border region due to their position at the southern borders or have a population of Hungarian nationality that exceeds the 10%'.

Those southern Slovakian districts, which have been formed on purpose with the tactics of gerrymandering and, in most of the cases, from a north-south section of the settlements of Hungarian and Slovak majority north and south of the language border, are among the largest districts with regard both to their population and their size. Thus, it is not an accident that among the 79 current districts of Slovakia 9 southern Slovakian

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<sup>9</sup> Slovakia signed a regional co-operation agreement during the third Mečiar cabinet, according to which it would establish four NUTS II type regions (regions compatible with the regional development of the EU) in Slovakia (besides Pozsony, a western, a central-Slovakian, and an eastern region). The Dzurinda cabinet stuck to the idea of four regions after the beginning of 1999, but beside Pozsony, it marked the south-western, north-western, and the eastern Slovakian regions to be the focus of regional development policies. Tuba, Lajos, Kifelé mint régió–befelé mint megye [Region toward the outside, county toward the inside]. *Új Szó*, March 20, 2001. p. 4; On the connections between the development of regions and municipal regions, cp. Reform a politikai stabilitáshoz. Beszélgetés Berényi Józseffel a közigazgatási reform és az európai uniós csatlakozás összefüggéseiről [Reform for political stability. Interview with József Berényi on the connections between the administrative reform and the EU accession]. *Ibid.* March 21, 2001. p. 5; Igazságtalanok velünk szemben. Kvarda József. Brüsszelben megmondták, hogy a megyék létrehozása nélkül Szlovákia nem kerülhet be az Unióba [We are treated unfairly. József Kvarda. They said it in Brussels that Slovakia cannot join the Union without the creation of the counties]. *Ibid.* March 10, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Regióny južného Slovenska–správa o sociálnoekonomickej situácii. [www.mkp.sk](http://www.mkp.sk).

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ones can be found among the 12 largest districts in view of their size. Within the single districts, districts of Hungarian character make up the administrative units of largest expansion almost without exception. All the visible disproportion just confirms the admitted discriminative intention with which the regions of Hungarian majority were tried to be integrated within the borders of districts and regions of Slovak majority in the course of the 1996 administrative arrangements.

Within the governing coalition, the SMK proved to be the promptest to launch initiatives in the issue of administrative reform. Last autumn it urged the reforms several times at coalition co-ordination meetings for the sake of the acceleration of the reform. Béla Bugár, President of SMK, Pál Csáky, Deputy Prime Minister, Miklós Duray, Managing Vice Director, but also the rest of the leaders of the party did the utmost to prevent the halt in the administrative reform. The SMK was willing to conclude even such compromises that came very near to a defeat during its activity within the government and at the cost of several of its priorities (minority language law, the issue of the lands of unidentified owners, the Hungarian department of the University of Nyitra). Still, it will not be able to vote a unanimous 'yes' despite the rejection of Hungarian modification proposals in the debates of the amendment of the constitution. There seems to be no more chance for a respectable withdrawal in the issue of the administrative reform.

Starting from the beginning of the year, the National Council (NC) of the party has pressed the preparatory works of the bill in several statements. The reason is that if the Parliament failed to pass the respective bills before the summer break, it would not be possible to set the date of the regional municipal elections this year. The political statement of the NC of January 13, 2001, urged on the enforcement of the principles laid down in the reform strategy of the government, that is, the transfer of certain public administration jurisdictions to the municipalities; the decentralisation of power and finances; the transformation of the public administration bodies of the districts into public specialised administrative offices; the creation of regional municipality structures.<sup>11</sup>

When it became more and more evident in February 2001 that the two leftist parties of the coalition wanted to shift the odium of the almost fatal delay of the reform to the SMK, the National Council of the party switched to counter attack with its statement of March 4, 2001: 'The Party of Hungarian Coalition warns its coalition partners that they can bring about a governmental crisis with their behaviour of rejection. The SMK distances itself from any similar irresponsible step, which, sometimes, recalls the methods of the Mečiar cabinet. The Party of the Hungarian Coalition considers this kind of politicising not else but gambling in a period when such documents are adopted which promote the country's accession to the EU and NATO. The SMK declares it once again that it is willing to support the administrative reform as a homogeneous process and calls on its partners to conduct constructive negotiations and strive for concensus.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The declaration of the National Council of the SMK. Pozsony, January 13, 2001. [www.mkp.sk](http://www.mkp.sk)

<sup>12</sup> Position statement of the National Presidency of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition on the issue of the administrative reform. March 4, 2001. [www.mkp.sk](http://www.mkp.sk)

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In the middle of March, the two leftist governing parties, the SDL and the SOP, pronounced it openly that the 8-district version of the administrative reform of Mečiar should be supported as opposed to the government proposal of Nižňanský, adopted by the coalition parties in June 2000. To the great astonishment of the other parties of the coalition, the leaders of the SDL did not exclude the possibility that they would ask for the support of the opposition parties in favour of the promotion of their proposal. Suddenly, it became a crucial matter for the prime minister, who found himself in an extremely difficult situation, what stand the Presidency of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition would take. If the SMK wanted to insist on its own 12+1 'Komárom' county version, the ministers of the three stubbornly opposing parties could have easily wrecked the bill and with it, the prime minister.

### Seeking a compromise or going into opposition

The Presidency of the SMK surprised many when—giving up its 'Komárom county' idea—it advised the support of the '12 county' version of the administrative reform to the representatives of the party and to its ministers in the coalition council and at the cabinet meeting. Only Pál Csáky, absent from the Presidency's meeting, announced a dissenting opinion in connection to the decision: 'I urge every member of the SMK to be moderate and rational. This is a strategic issue which is going to influence our lives for 40–50 years.'<sup>13</sup>

The position taken up by the Presidency of the SMK contributed to the following result to a great extent: of the 20 ministers present at the 150<sup>th</sup> extraordinary meeting of the cabinet of April 1, 12 voted for the '12 county' version, while 8 for the '8 county' version. At the press conference subsequent to the extraordinary cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Dzurinda greatly appreciated the decision of the Presidency of the SMK and he concluded that the SMK 'was able to step over its own shadow.' At the same time, he reacted quite irritable at the proposition that could be heard from Pál Csáky in one of the commercial televisions, and he made it clear in connection to the contradictory behaviour of the two leftist parties of the government: the prime minister would soon have to make use of the institution of the vote of confidence to clear the air around the coalition.<sup>14</sup>

At last, the extraordinary cabinet meeting pledged its support to the symmetric model of 12 public administration and 12 corresponding municipal administrative units, and passed two bills: the bill on regional municipalities and the bill on the regional municipal elections. It also trusted the responsible ministers to propose the amendments required because of the new bills before May 31 so that they could be adopted by the cabinet and submitted to the Parliament before the summer break.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The separate opinion of Csáky. *Új Szó*, March 27, 2001. p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Mimoriadne 150. zasadnutie vlády*. 1. apríla 2001. [www.government.gov.sk](http://www.government.gov.sk). See the opinion of Pál Csáky expressed in a program of TV Markíza and published in a paper of Pozsony: *Národná oboroda*, April 2, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> *Reforma verejnej správy*. Home page of President Mikuláš Dzurinda: [www.government.gov.sk](http://www.government.gov.sk); It turned out that the majority of the members of the Presidency of the SMK voted for the '12 county' version for two reasons: first, they wanted to avoid that the '8 county' version, which the opposition favoured,

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In the weeks after the extraordinary cabinet meeting, the situation became more entangled as President Schuster, at the initiative of the SOP, offered to mediate for the sake of political coordination and adoption of another, this time asymmetric solution which would be acceptable by many. Also the coalition council of the governing parties discussed this option and although every participant promised silence for the duration of the negotiations, the planned 4+12 model (4 regions and 12 counties) came to light and induced further debates. The decision of the Presidency of the SMK it brought in connection to the administrative reform on March 23 could cause problems—the most severe clash within the party of the period after the unification of its three predecessors.

Eleven of the fifteen members present at the meeting were in favour of the draft, which called on the ministers of the party to support the '12 county' model in the government. Subsequently, Miklós Duray who remained in the minority, accused the ones accepting the '12 county' version in public with intertwining economic interests. Also Pál Csáky, absent from the meeting, joined the opinion of Miklós Duray, which was understood by many as the declaration of the presidential ambitions of Csáky.<sup>16</sup> The strained situation, evolved among the leaders of the party, led to further conflicts at the meeting of the NC on March 31. The National Council examined once more the possibilities of the ministers and the representatives of the party but instead of the disentanglement of the situation, the disputes of the leadership continued. Many of the NC members voted against the draft worrying about the interests of the Hungarian population of their region, while others voted no following the example of Miklós Duray.

Pál Csáky answered the attacks against him—that he, quoth he, left the moderate group led by Béla Bugár and joined the radicals of the NC—like this: 'It was not me to change my opinion but the NC to change theirs, since the general assembly of the party had decided earlier that the splitting up of the six districts inhabited by Hungarians would not be acceptable for the SMK.'<sup>17</sup>

The '12 county' bill accepted at the extraordinary cabinet meeting of April 1 with the help also of the ministers of the SMK, can be submitted to the Slovak Parliament before the summer break most probably through procedure of priority. The fate awaiting it there is next to impossible to foretell, as beyond the unanimous rejection of the opposition parties, also the two leftist parties of the government and the representatives of

be placed on the agenda of the Parliament as an alternative adopted by the cabinet; second, Prime Minister Dzurinda promised that two districts of Slovak majority from Nagyszombat county and one from Zemplén county would be transferred to counties indifferent from the point of view of the Hungarians. According to the decision of the cabinet adopted on April 1, the districts of Szenic and Bazin would go to Pozsony county and Varanno district to the county of Sárospéterjes. The version of the 12 in front of the Parliament. The conditions of the SMK in connection to the reform have been met. *Új Szó*, April 2, 2001. p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Hríb, Štefan, Már a magyarjaink is? [Our Hungarians, too?] *Új Szó*, April 19, 2001. p. 2; Mindkét fél a jót akarja. Bugár Béla, a Magyar Koalíció Pártja elnöke: az MKP Országos Tanácsa még nem a reformról döntött [Both parties mean to do good. Bugár, Béla, President of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition: it was not the reform that National Council of the SMK decided upon]. *Ibid.* April 7, 2001. p. 5; Vélemények és ellenvélemények [Opinions and counter-opinions]. *Ibid.* April 3, 2001. p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Pál Csáky did not try to conceal that he had information about the fact that one or another NC members had indeed economic interests, namely in the Transpetrol company.

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the SMK are expected to submit amendment proposals which are not compatible with the '12 county' version.

József Kvarda, Vice-President of the SMK responsible for municipal work, was deliberating at the beginning of April upon making use of the independent motion a representative could submit: 'It is difficult even to imagine what to expect at the Parliament as Dzurinda uses us as a battering ram against the two other partners. Whether the party authorizes me or not, I am going to submit motions for amendment. I am going to present the county by the Danube which has been proposed in various forms, that is, everything we have urged on up until now.'<sup>18</sup>

Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda published his opinions on the administrative reform on his personal homepage, under the timely political issues heading in April 2001. He set a self-confident schedule for the 2001–2002 reforms: according to the prime minister, the government would launch the decentralization of administrative jurisdictions and the necessary funds after the parliamentary elections of early summer. Afterwards, in the autumn, it would prepare the regional municipal elections planned to be held at the end of 2001. The elected regional parliaments would assume their jurisdiction and receive the necessary 30 billion corona budget funds in January 2002. According to the optimistic schedule of the Slovak Prime Minister, the administrative reform could take effect before the following parliamentary elections.

Very few trusted a close realisation of the administrative reform in Slovakia at the beginning of May because: there were contradictions within the coalition; the two leftist parties had their own differing ideas; there was a divergence between the moderate and the radical wing of the SMK; and, naturally, there was the continuous pressure exerted by the opposition parties. Consider the facts that the unemployment is above 20% and there are sectors and services permanently in crisis because of the tarrying foreign investments. In this situation, a government would be hardly able to concentrate on the administrative reform, important condition of EU accession, even if the parties of the coalition were expressing their solidarity without conditions. Given that it is predictable that the tension within the coalition will only increase as the elections are approaching, the chances of the administrative reform are decreasing with every month.

The Hungarian community of Slovakia and the SMK could already draw a good lesson from the experiences of the political struggles accompanying the reform. In the eighth year of its existence, the political public opinion of the independent Slovakia does not reckon the administrative decentralization of the country to be an indispensably important step. What is more, it tends to look at it as to the spring of some kind of danger, an outside pressure coming from the part of the EU. The role that the SMK played in the government the first two years of the Dzurinda cabinet earned a relatively great number of backers among the supporters of the democratic Slovak parties. However, the more resolute assertion of the political aims of the party made the co-operation with the Hungarian politicians uneasy even within the governing coalition. All this, in particular because the opposition took every opportunity for swaying the public

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

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into an anti-Hungarian, anti-minority, and anti-SMK direction. The leadership of the SMK—if the final version of the administrative reform will be disadvantageous for the Hungarians of Slovakia—will have much smaller chances for manoeuvring in the future in issues like minority language law, the charter of European regional and lesser spoken languages, the lands of unidentified owners, and the realisation of the Hungarian department at the University of Nyitra. The administrative reform can set boundaries in the long run to the situation and possibilities of the voter basis of the party and the lower level elected Hungarian politicians, representatives, and mayors. The opposing standpoints within the leadership of the party in connection to the reform shed light upon the limitations of the co-operation with the Slovak parties just as to the limited nature of the means of radicalism which always fell back merely upon verbal and demonstrative political gestures. Some analysts immediately drew comparison between the situation emerged with respect to the reform and the internal division of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania. It is a fact that the search for compromises might intensify the internal confrontations. Moreover, there are a number of risk factors, which have to be taken into consideration among the consequences of a possible withdrawal from the government. In case the National Council of the Slovak Republic accepted—with the opposition votes—an administrative reform bill unacceptable for the Hungarian minority, it would be very likely that those would gain majority within the party leadership who supported the idea of leaving the government.

The administrative reform—if any of its elements will be realised in practice at all—will have a much smaller effect in Slovakia on the solution of the minority question than what it had in case of the devolution and decentralisation reforms of the Western European countries. Nevertheless, the self-government aspirations of the Hungarian minority are much clearer and politically circumscribed than 4–5 years ago. It will be much easier to carry out municipal political actions from this position than from the declarative level of the one-time congress of Komárom. This might be true even if the SMK had to continue working after the elections with a casting, in which it received an opposition role.