

## Identity and Ethnicity at the Slovak-Hungarian Border

*Muriel Blaive*

What is the significance of a state border which keeps apart people who have ambivalent feelings about its legitimacy? Which keeps apart people who used to belong to the same nation and massively think that they still do? Which keeps apart people who speak the same language? What is the significance of a state border which, on the other hand, forces two nations who had an antagonistic history to share a common destiny on the same side? What was the significance of a border between two socialist countries in these conditions and how is the situation now that the border has, for all intents and purposes, dissolved into Schengen?

On the basis of 30 oral history interviews led in Komárno (10 with Slovaks, 20 with Hungarians, so as to roughly answer to the town's ethnic composition), my aim is to question the complicated relations between the two communities and their respective way to build their own identity under communism and today.

### **The case of Komárno: the main issues at stake**

Before 1918, Komárno, then called by its Hungarian name Komárom, was spreading on both sides of the Danube. Komárom was separated into two different towns only following the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the 1920 Trianon treaty, which established the Danube as the border between Hungary and the newly established Czechoslovakia. These borders were sometimes drawn in defiance of the ethnic map but they were meant to favour the economic development of the new Slavic state. The Danube plain was given to Slovakia because of its agricultural potential, while Komárno itself also hosted a big naval factory. Komárno's historical center found itself on what is today the Slovak side.

Barnabás Vajda, lecturer at the History Department of the Pedagogical Faculty at Selye J. University in Komárno, has led the study in Komárom and presented its fascinating results in his own report. His main findings regarding crossborder connections include the following statements: 'There is a phenomenon in the thirty interviews which can be described as a symptom of a triad influence on peoples' memory. This symptom is a complex and organic combination of three tendencies, making the Komárom case unique: there is an almost complete absence of external sources when remembering; there is a phenomenon of

suppressed memory; and there is a clear influence of Communism or Socialism as a system on their way of remembering.<sup>1</sup> In the present essay, it is in Komárno that I will try to sort out the perception of the « other » – may he/she come from the same town but from a different nationality, or from across the border. This report is not a microhistorical study in the full sense – archive material has not been used, local media has not been analyzed –, it is at this stage only an oral history endeavour.

At the time it took place in 2008, this study was inscribed into the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres' Cold War program, originally designed by Berthold Molden.<sup>2</sup> I also took part in the pilot study of this program, which was at the Czech border to Austria (České Velenice<sup>3</sup>), the border had a key importance in the town's life since it was almost hermetically closed and tightly defended. But the border in Komárno was between two countries of the Eastern bloc, i.e. was a « simple », internal border not worth trespassing (it was of course forbidden to pass it without visa but this visa was easy to get and smuggling was widely practiced, i.e. did not require to try and force the border by illegal means). Although there were some differences between the Czechoslovak and Hungarian communist regimes, there was no significant difference in standard of living between the two sides and it was not an ideological border between two systems and two ways of life. The population was not mobilized to take part in the border guarding the way it was at the border to capitalist countries.

Hence, where the relationship to the communist regime was traumatic in České Velenice, people were neither obsessed nor even very interested in the communist past in the case at hand. « Dealing with the past » appeared even less of an issue to Hungarians, since they had no serious complaint towards a communist regime which guaranteed and respected their minority rights. The most striking trait in the Komárno interviews is, on the contrary, the absence of interest for socio-political and ideological issues. Pell-mell, communism, democracy, Hungarian fascism, listening to Radio Free Europe, belonging to the communist party, the differences between the Hungarian and the Czechoslovak

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1 The 'Long European Post War Period' in Communicative Memories and (Trans)National Public Spheres. Manuscript report on Komárom (Hungary) by Barnabás Vajda, János Selye University (Komárno, Slovakia) 2008. Partially published in Barnabás Vajda: Remembering the Cold War in Komárom. *Eruditio – Educatio* 4 (2009), 2., p. 22.

2 See the description of this project under <http://ehp.lbg.ac.at>.

3 See Muriel Blaive, Berthold Molden, *Grenzfälle. Österreichische und tschechische Erfahrungen am Eisernen Vorhang*, Weitra, Bibliothek der Provinz, 2009, also published in Czech under the title *Hranice probíhají vodním tokem. Odrazy historie ve vnímání obyvatel Gmündu a Českých Velenic*, Brno, Barrister & Principal, 2010.

communist regimes, settling accounts with the old communist system, 1956, 1968, 1989, even 1993 (the establishment of the new Slovak state), Slovak politics, are all items which prompted indifferent and absent-minded responses from the interviewees.<sup>4</sup> Religion did not appear to be a salient issue either, so I will leave this factor aside in this study.

The essentialist and metaphysical question in Komárno revolves much rather around both communities' identity. What does it mean to belong to the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, what does it mean to belong to the Slovak minority in Komárno: these are major issues preoccupying the town's inhabitants and they had much to say on these topics. I thus questioned them in detail on how they conceive of their cohabitation with the other community, on language questions, parents and children, school and education, loyalty, and on their relationship to Hungarians from Hungary.

In this essay, I will reflect on the ambiguous «advantages» of communism, and then deconstruct how the language problem tends to confine the Hungarians into a territorial prison and finally will ponder on what the future holds for Southern Slovakia. First, however, I will briefly describe the questionnaire I used.

## Questionnaire

Barnabás Vajda and I led 30 interviews each in Komárno and Komárom in the course of the year 2008. In order to find interview partners, we proceeded by «snowball effect», i.e. we asked each interviewee who agreed to speak to us to provide us with a few potential contacts, leading to more interviews. These interviews cannot be considered as biographies or life narratives. Because the project as a whole involves some 600 interviews led in 20 different towns, we had to deal with a number of contingencies. We settled on a semi-open interview technique, posing definite questions which would be as similar and comparable as possible in every different context and every different country.

My oldest interviewee was born in 1923, my youngest in 1992 and the rest is spread more or less evenly in between. The questions I asked them can be stapled into seven main groups, focussing on:

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4 Although Komárno had its fair share of economic problems : « Unemployment rose to 25% in Komárno with the decline of the town's port and the bankruptcy of the SLK shipyard in 2000. The yard was eventually rescued by the government and rebranded SLKB; however, the number of workers was reduced from 3 000 in 1996 to 1 100 in 2005 (of which around 700 work in production and of which 10% are sub-contractors) », see Edgar Martin, « The impact upon employment of the decline in Danube transport », *South East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, 1/2006, p. 81-88, accessed via [www.cceol.com](http://www.cceol.com), p. 4.

- Their life at the edge of the country;
- Their relationship to the other side, past and present;
- Their relationship with the other community inside their own town;
- Their relationship to capitalism and socialism;
- Their view on local history;
- Their view on Hungarian minority rights under communism and today;
- Their view on the EU accession of Slovakia, as well as that of Romania, Bulgaria and other prospective states like Turkey and Ukraine.

In addition, I took down some factual information: sex, place and year of birth, how long the interviewee has lived in Komárno, mother tongue and nationality, education level, occupation of parents, family status and religion. In this article and for reasons of space I have chosen a few of my interviewees as “representatives” of all the others. We have here an 85-year old Hungarian worker, Gábor Czár, a 47-year old Slovak woman, Božena Ebertová, a 36-year old Hungarian high-school teacher, János Erdei, a 21-year old Hungarian student, Lajos Bártok, and a 16-year Hungarian high-school student, Tünde Belai. As is customary in such studies and as most of my interviewees asked for it anyway, the names have been changed so that the people are not recognizable.

### **The «advantages» of communism**

This Komárno study shows that communism had its advantages in terms of dealing with national minorities, at least in this particular Central European context (dealing with minorities in the Soviet Union under stalinism is of course an entirely different issue). In fact, one might provocatively wonder if it was not at least as good as the European Union in this respect. Communist propaganda in Czechoslovakia always claimed to support national minorities and their rights, apart from a short interlude during and after the Second World War. Thus in Slovakia as elsewhere, Hungarians were relatively well treated, they had schools, high schools, theatres, cinemas, newspapers and bookstores. In short, they had access to culture in their own language and they had the right to use their language in the administration (post office, townhall) if they were in sufficient percentage in a town.

This is of course true of the European Union as well, which guarantees fair treatment of minorities. But the difference resides in the authoritarian and paternalistic nature of the communist regime: integration was not an option but an order. Hungarians were generally compelled to know the Slovak language, if only in order to find a (compulsory) job and they were generally strongly “expected” (if not openly forced) to take part in the public, bilingual and binational, life of the town.

Of course, communism benefited at a general level from the image of a regime which was established for the benefit of workers – Komárno was after all an industrial town, where the communists were getting 30% of the votes already before the Second World War. But the communist regime imposed integration to the Hungarian minority. Božena Ebertová (a 47-year old Slovak woman) told me for instance:

B.E. Our Hungarians have the possibility to learn Slovak but they don't want to communicate. Before 1989, one can say that 80% of the Hungarians spoke Slovak perfectly, because they had to study in Slovak schools. Slovak was more used in shops, etc. But there was a turn-about after 1989, and where there is a majority of Hungarians, they stick to themselves. They stopped, in my opinion, I see it on them, they don't want to, they don't have any practice, and they don't have any urge to communicate in Slovak.

In my sample, both Slovak and Hungarian interviewees who were formerly members or at least sympathizers of the KSČ were less nationalistic and more tolerant towards the cohabitation of these two communities than others. Among the Hungarians, the former communists were those who were the least opposed to their children marrying into Slovak families and sending their own children to Slovak-speaking schools. Our 85-year old Hungarian worker Gábor Czár, for instance, has a Slovak daughter and Slovak grandchildren.

Even when these older Hungarians never truly learned to master Slovak, their loyalty to the Slovak state is higher than that of the younger generation. This relative abating of nationalism in Komárno shows that the communist regimes were quite capable of adapting, ideologically speaking, to their environment and capable of positive or negative discrimination in their national policies.

The ability of the communist regimes to exploit or downsize the national problem according to the circumstances becomes clear when Komárno is compared to České Velenice, where the communist regime clearly used and instrumentalized nationalist feelings against the Austrians – who were on the other side of a highly political border: the Iron Curtain. In this case, fear and its instrumentalization played a major role in local politics. The alleged threat posed by the capitalist «foreigner» (from Gmünd) justified for the regime the need to control everybody.

The «external threat» coming from the outside of the country found its counterpart in the «internal threat» posed by the candidates to emigration who came into town from all over the country while looking for a way to escape west. The regime largely convinced/forced the local population to surveil itself and to «voluntarily» entertain a terror climate turned against its own self in the name of the fight against the «internal» and «external» enemies.

None of this was known or even thinkable in Komárno, where the two national communities were much too solidary among themselves to consider massively turning in their own members to the authorities – while turning the communities onto one another was the last thing even the communist regime knew would have been wise.

On the other hand, it is interesting to notice in the interviews that the respect of their national rights mattered to the Slovak Hungarians so much that they sometimes denied attention even to the ideological and authoritarian nature of the communist regime, as if it were secondary. As an example of this relativization, the old people were frequently asking questions such as «Which regime was it in [1939, 1945, the 1950s, 1968, 1989...]» when I asked them questions relating to the past. Older people in Komárno have indeed experienced the First Republic, the Hungarian fascist state, the renewed Czechoslovak democracy, the communist regime, the renewed Czechoslovak democracy again and the Slovak independent state and seem to have kept an even and flattening memory from all those opposing regimes, as if fascism, democracy and communism were not clearly distinguishable. Such a politico-historical confusion is really unthinkable for a Czech: even a thoroughly uneducated citizen could never possibly mix up nazism, communism and democracy – but he/she would probably be totally ignorant about the fate of minorities in his country, whereas it is a central issue for all Slovak Hungarians.

### **Depolitization: 1989**

As incredible as it may seem, for instance, a number of the Hungarian interviewees could not clearly remember what had happened in 1989. This indifference is certainly due also to the fact that the population didn't see much of a change in their social and economic conditions immediately after the revolution, as the reforms were implemented rather slowly in Slovakia.

The reduction of the entire postwar period to the «Beneš decrees» question, i.e. to the expropriation, followed by the forced resettlement of many Slovak Hungarians in the Czech Republic until the beginning of the 1950s, while an attempted «exchange of population» took place with Hungary, sending Slovak Hungarians to Hungary and receiving in return members of the Hungarian Slovak minority, seems to me typical of a vision of history where the ideology question (communism or democracy) is reduced to its national dimension. The question is not to know whether communism was better as a regime than democracy, but of how the Hungarians were treated as a national minority. In this respect, communism got the advantage in the interviewees' view. I had an

amusing dialogue with Gábor Czár, during which I had a hard time to figure out who he meant as being « the democratic president ». To see Klement Gottwald, known as the architect of the stalinization of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in the 1920s and as Stalin's most faithful Czech pupil in the 1950s, the person who bore the biggest responsibility for the show trials and for the policy of everyday terror, depicted as « the true democrat » among the past few Czechoslovak presidents can indeed happen only either to a fanatical communist... or to a Hungarian from Slovakia. But it is true that the communist regime, after having supported the Beneš decrees and enjoyed all the benefits it could enjoy from the redistribution of the German and sometimes Hungarian properties, after supporting the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans and the deportation of the Hungarian minority to the Czech lands, went back at the beginning of the 1950s to its traditional defense policy of the minorities. The Hungarians forcibly deported to the Sudetenland were allowed to come home and they recovered their citizenship and all their rights in the course of the 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

This « unpoliticized » or peculiarly politicized view of history contributes to relativizing the importance of the 1989 revolution: Tünde Belai (age 16) for instance doesn't know if her parents listened to Radio Free Europe, she doesn't have the impression her parents' life has changed in any way after 1989 as opposed to before, she doesn't know if they were members of the communist party – and more importantly perhaps, she doesn't care about any of this.

The 1989 changes, which took place in Prague and Bratislava, are perceived as being far away. The two Slovak interviewees who were not half-Hungarian had at least a relatively clear vision of the symbolical value of « 1989 » and of what it meant (fall of communism, reestablishment of democracy) but most Hungarian interviewees had a much more foggy vision of this recent past. Where the České Velenice interviewees understood my references to 1989 without second thought (for instance « How has your life changed since 1989 from a social and economic point of view? ») and simultaneously decried my assumption that their lifestyle must have changed significantly, the Slovaks understood it in a political sense but didn't have many changes to report on the economic and social side, while the Hungarians sometimes had a hard time to figure out what I was even referring to.

In other words, the Komárno Hungarians have lived in a national sphere, not in the sphere of the official ideology. Their own ideology is their personal, national identity, and their rights as a minority are what really counts. On the other hand and as opposed to České Velenice, both Hungarians and Slovaks

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5 See Muriel Blaive, *1956 Une déstalinisation manquée*, Brussels, Complexe, 2005.

spontaneously quoted 2004 (the entry into the EU) and even 2007 (the entry into Schengen) as important dates for their country and for their border regions. Their view on European integration is much more positive than in the Czech border region. Although Slovakia had not yet entered the Eurozone at the time of the interviews (it happened on 1 January 2009), people anticipated it with a mixture of pride and apprehension. Clearly, and again this is a big difference with České Velenice, Slovakia as a young state is now coming to a much appreciated international recognition and appreciation and its inhabitants, both Hungarian and Slovak, are somewhat proud of it. Their view on integrating Turkey and Ukraine into the Union, although often also negative, were nevertheless much more positive than in České Velenice, where nearly no one approved of the idea.

But to summarize this first part, if communism might retrospectively be seen as at least as « successful » as the European Union on the minority question, it is only because its authoritarian component allowed it quite naturally to demand integration from the Hungarian minority. The rights and benefits the latter were getting were balanced by an obligation of loyalty to the Czechoslovak state, which, as the interviews with elder people show, was dutifully respected. Nowadays on the contrary, as I found out from the interviews, young Hungarians barely master the Slovak language if at all, make little or no efforts to integrate themselves to Slovak society and live a parallel life of their own. The result is that integration is going rather backwards. I will now dwell on this point.

### **A questionable Hungarian integration in Slovakia, and the question of the Hungarian loyalty**

The older people, both Slovak and Hungarian, knew and know the “other” community well; the older Hungarians often speak Slovak, and really many of the old Slovaks who live in the border region speak Hungarian; they often had friends in the other community and there were some mixed marriages, with a certain degree of tolerance concerning the education, language and national identity of the children. Yet and despite this, there was a general expression of hostility toward the other community in my interviews. So I could summarize it by saying that they knew each other well, but they didn’t like each other much.

Nowadays, I found with the younger people that it is almost the opposite: although it is theoretically still compulsory to learn Slovak, the young Hungarians seemed to me in average, at least in Komárno, to be doing quite badly in Slovak; they couldn’t understand even basic sentences; they had almost no Slovak friends and if they had any, they spoke together rather Hungarian.

Seen from a Slovak point of view and even when it is couched in polite terms, Hungarians are simply seen as strong nationalists. Božena Ebertová (47-year old Slovak woman) expanded on this theme:

M.B. Do you see a difference between Slovaks and Hungarians in Komárno?

B.E. Yes, of course, there are differences. As I said the differences are that the Hungarian mentality is very fixated on nationality, they dance to this tune, that they are Hungarians living here, so... [...] We rarely celebrate the fact that we are Slovak. This patriotism, this pride to be Hungarian, is more visible with them.

According to her testimony, this national pressure is sometimes hard to bear for the Slovaks in Komárno and amounts to a real cultural domination. For instance, she claims, the Jókai theatre was created for both Hungarians and Slovaks but ended up presenting almost exclusively Hungarian culture. According to her, things had gotten better only recently, since a new director who had studied in Bratislava and spoke also Slovak came into function. She regretted not having access to enough books, enough culture in Slovak: « The fact that we live here in a place where there is a Hungarian majority means that we don't have the possibility to teach our children everything which they should learn. » The language border seemed to her a major barrier: « When my family comes here to visit us, they feel as if they were in Hungary because you can hear Hungarian everywhere. It's enough to go to Levice, there in the street you hear Slovak even though there is a Hungarian minority there as well. The atmosphere there is not Hungarian but here in Komárno there is a Hungarian atmosphere. »

Historical perceptions are also useful in mapping out local and national identities and there the surprise for me was the extent of the Komárno Hungarians' lack of loyalty for Slovakia and the level of their loyalty for Hungary. Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian fascist leader<sup>6</sup> who reconquered the lost territories in 1938 and reentered Komárno on his white horse amidst massive enthusiasm, is still seen as a hero among the Hungarians, including among young Hungarians; his fall and the defeat of fascism and nazism in 1945, is seen largely still as a tragedy insofar as the region went back to Slovakia and was lost to Hungary forever. The Soviet arrival in 1945 is seen as a liberation by the Slovaks, but as an occupation by the Hungarians – apart from the former communists.

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6 Author's remarks about 'Admiral Horthy as a Hungarian fascist leader' are considered by lecturers/consultants as highly disputable.

But on the other hand, one cannot claim so simply that the Hungarians from Slovakia are totally loyal to the Hungarian state either. Also, if we switch to perceptions in terms of national image, even among the Hungarians of Komárno, Hungarians of Hungary do not necessarily have a very good image. The result is that the Slovak Hungarians' loyalty is more than anything rooted in their own land, in their territory. It's a territorial identity – where the Hungarian town of Komárom still largely belongs but not the rest of Hungary.

The Komárno Slovaks also take pride in their local identity, albeit in a different way. They praise their own open-mindedness, their own tolerance. Here is what Božena Ebertová (47) told me:

B.E. There is a difference [here as opposed to the rest of the country.] There has to be more tolerance here since we live right at the border and we are used to encountering other nations and we have to solve this communication problem, especially me since I don't speak good Hungarian. This means that we always find a way to say what we want to say or to answer them if they ask something. When I know that they speak some Slovak, I try to help them and to tell them or show it to them, and they are very sweet and thankful when we manage to understand each other. So here there is more tolerance. [...] These border towns are, I don't know if you could say cosmopolitan because they are small, but there is more open-mindedness.

The major inconvenience of this rooted-in-the-ground identity is that these Komárno Hungarians cannot move at all: even the rest of Slovakia is foreign country for them because people don't speak Hungarian there, while they don't speak Slovak; so they could not possibly live there.

Unsurprisingly, the Slovak Hungarian interviewees were not at ease when asked to define the « real », symbolical border, as opposed to the state border. Since it is nowadays truly unthinkable and completely taboo that Southern Slovakia should go back to Hungary, the ideal situation for them would be if there was no border. With Schengen, the state border is much less present, which is psychologically pleasing to the Slovak Hungarians (even though most of them, as they told me, in fact hardly ever go to Hungary.) That is no doubt why they are so pro-European.

## Conclusion

Overall, what this oral history study shows is that the consequential nationality affirmation policy of the communist regime has had lasting, mildly positive but also negative, effects. The « advantages » of communism I referred to point to the « democratic » respect of Hungarian identity, as in this interview where Gottwald was described as an emblematic « democratic president », and to a

minimal integration. On the other hand, the communist regime did not offer any alternative or improvement to the nationality policy as it was practiced in the democratic interwar period under the influence of US President Woodrow Wilson's 1918 Fourteen Points on democracy and self-determination, policy whose utter failure largely led to the dismantlement of Czechoslovakia in 1938-1939.

Under the pretence of pursuing a « democratic » policy and thus of ensuring a reassuring continuity, the communist policy towards Slovak Hungarians captured the « hidden transcripts »<sup>7</sup> of Slovak Hungarians and of Czechoslovaks in general through the Slovak Hungarian issue, insofar as it was accomplished in the name of a historical, core value of the country.<sup>8</sup> Czechoslovak communism appropriated for itself, reshaped and instrumentalized nationalism or nationalist feelings in a radically different way in Komárno as opposed to České Velenice – where it had simply encouraged xenophobia towards Germans/Austrians. This pacification of the Hungarian question in Slovakia before 1989 thus historically points us to yet another source of ideological success of the communist regime in the national sphere and to yet another key to its decades-long stability.

But the consequences today of this instrumentalization are not necessarily amusing : this policy based on imposing seclusion and self-affirming isolation, leading to parochialism and social fragmentation, both through « hard » (physical violence) and « soft » (self-appropriation of the rule) power also led to the construction of a « nationality prison », to a situation in which an individual core « Hungarian » identity in Slovakia can prove to be a tenacious and one-dimensional mental fixation – which is a much more dubious heritage. The mental/cultural/linguistic barrier constructed by the Slovak Hungarian minority around itself is all the harder to shake that it is now self-inflicted in good faith (we live in democracy) and thus unacknowledged and unreflected.

It is of course true that the Slovak state is often behaving in an unacceptable way towards the Hungarian minority.<sup>9</sup> Slovaks in general certainly tend to overlook the fact that Slovak Hungarians are not Hungarians from Hungary and that fully integrating them would be to the whole state's advantage. Instead, the public debate tends to be dominated by nationalist Slovak political elites (from Bratislava) who often resort to cheap and useless provocations, while nationalist

7 See James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992.

8 See Muriel Blaive, « La démocratie pour les Tchèques: une légitimité politique et une composante identitaire », *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 1/2003, p. 59-82.

9 See Tomáš Strážay, « Nationalist Populism and Foreign Policy: Focus on Slovak-Hungarian Relations », *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 1/2005, p. 47-60, accessed via [www.ceeol.com](http://www.ceeol.com).

Hungarian politicians (from Budapest) contribute to degrading the situation.<sup>10</sup> Komárno Hungarians and Komárno Slovaks are in a way hostage of nationalist and political issues in Slovak-Hungarian relations which have nothing to do with their local situation and which could give the false impression that daily cohabitation is difficult and tense – whereas it is not.<sup>11</sup>

But the language question does come out of this study as the major problem and the knot symbolizing all the difficulty to deal with the integration of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Judging from the development in the past twenty years and from the interviews quoted here, one cannot be but pessimistic or at least sceptical concerning the future : it certainly doesn't look as if younger Hungarian generations are going to master Slovak increasingly better. It cannot be denied that both Slovak and Hungarian are complicated languages, too, rendering cross-learning difficult. But as long as Slovak Hungarians don't know Slovak properly, they will continue being prisoners of their own territory (they cannot move anywhere else in Slovakia) and they will continue living withdrawn from the majority Slovak society.

What can be done? Supposing English should be made a second official language in Slovakia, the interviews show that communication would greatly improve between the two communities. If the symbolic linguistic rivalry could be bypassed and neutralized in this way, a priori mistrust and suspicion would be more easily overcome and more friendships could be concluded – as happens when Slovak and Slovak Hungarians meet abroad. Such a « solution » is probably not realistic ; but it might provide food for thought and help pointing to the fact that the open confrontation (« learn Slovak or be condemned to live outside Slovak society ») is a good solution neither for Slovaks nor for Slovak Hungarians.

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10 Sociologist Tomáš Strážay analyzed the nationalist-populist features in both the Slovak and Hungarian political discourses at the beginning of the 2000s, showing that populism and populist techniques of communication with the electorate are by no means limited to so-called extreme parties but are widely shared by parties members of the governmental coalition. The author shows, among others in the case of the failed attempt by Slovak Hungarian politicians to create a « Komárno County », that symbols connected with national/ethnic identity have been instrumentalized by the Slovak and Hungarian political elites to impact the bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary and to influence domestic politics. He points out to the ambivalence between « nation state » (defined either by the citizens in one particular state or by one ethnic group that dominates the state) and « national interest » (defined either as interests of the state defined by citizenship or by the interests of the dominant ethnic community.) Bilateral relations involving ethnically mixed states can thus become very tricky. See Tomáš Strážay, « Nationalist Populism and Foreign Policy: Focus on Slovak-Hungarian Relations », *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 1/2005, p. 47-60, accessed via [www.ceeol.com](http://www.ceeol.com).

11 Slovak historian Elena Mannová has pointed out in the Komárno case already for the prewar period the discrepancy between the grassroot population, who was experiencing the inter-ethnicity without major problem, and the political elite in terms of nationalistic language. See Elena Mannová, « 'Ale teraz je dobrý Slováč.' Vplyv novej štátnej hranice na etnické vzťahy v Lučenci a Komárne (1918-1938) », in Ivan Kamenec, Elena Mannová, Eva Kowalská (eds), *Historik v čase a priestore : laudatio Lubomírovi Liptákov*, Bratislava, Historický ústav Slovenskej akadémie vied, 2000, p. 53-62.

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