

THE STATUS OF SLOVAKIA IN THE INTER-WAR  
CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC  
– THE TRANSITION OF THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE  
SYSTEM AND THE SLOVAK PEOPLE'S PARTY'S  
PLANS FOR AUTONOMY

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The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938, hereafter, the CSR) on the formation of “Slovakia” as an administrative unit.

On January 1st, 1993, the Slovak Republic was founded as an independent state. From the viewpoint of the history of “Czechoslovakia,” this event shows the failure of the solution of the “Slovak Question” in the CSR that had continued since its foundation as well as the expression of Slovak nationalism.

In the arena of politics of the inter-war CSR, the Slovak People's Party (hereafter, the SPP) represented Slovak nationalism. The SPP put up a stout resistance to “Czechoslovakism;” that is, the idea that the Czechs and the Slovaks should be considered as one political nation, and repeatedly demanded autonomy for Slovakia based on the right of self-determination of the Slovak nation. The demand of the SPP was realized on October 6th, 1938, immediately after the acceptance of the Munich Dictate, and on March 14th, 1939, the “Slovak State” was founded under the protection of Germany.

It was difficult for us to evaluate the action and the role of the SPP in the inter-war CSR. The SPP became the focus of the argument of many scholars. Nowadays, in Slovakia, interpretations credit them as the party that succeeded to the current of Slovak nationalism from the 19th century.

In this paper, however, the author does not focus on the political tactics of the SPP, but on the process through which Slovakia was built as an administrative and territorial unit.

Before 1918 Slovakia had belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary. In this Kingdom, Slovakia had not been as an administrative unit. In the local administrative system of the Kingdom, this region had been divided into 18–19 counties. The status of “Slovakia” in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had been utterly different from that of the “historical Lands of the Bohemian Crown (hereafter, the Czech Lands),” namely Bohemia proper, Moravia and Silesia, which had stemmed from the historical Lands and had formed provinces of the Monarchy. Moreover, a border, which could divide “Slovakia” from “Hungary,” had not existed as well.

In short, before the foundation of the CSR, the existence of the territory that the Slovak nationalists called “Slovakia” had not been officially recognized, although they had demanded an autonomous status for Slovakia in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in the latter half of the 19th century.

However Slovakia rapidly strengthened its status during the period of the inter-war CSR and became an independent state in 1939. Considering this process, it is necessary to focus on the influence of the CSR on the formation and the delimitation of the territory of Slovakia.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the status of Slovakia in the several plans that referred to the administrative system of the CSR. Through this analysis, the author intends to show a new viewpoint about the formation of “Slovakia” and to reconsider the influence of the CSR on the demands of the SPP as the concrete expression of Slovak nationalism.

## **1. The Founding of the First Czechoslovak Republic and Slovakia**

On October 28th, 1918, the Czechoslovak National Committee proclaimed the independence of the Czechoslovak Republic in Prague. Two days later, on October 30th, the Slovak National Council (hereafter, the SNC) held an assembly in Turčiansky Svätý Martin. They made a declaration which approved the independence of the CSR and proclaimed the participation of Slovakia in it. But these events did not mean that the annexation of Slovakia to the CSR was achieved immediately after the founding of the CSR.

The SNC did not have the political and military ability to govern Slovakia. And the new government of Hungary headed by Mihályi Károlyi attempted to preserve the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Hungary, including Slovakia. At first, Károlyi attempted to achieve this aim through negotiations with the SNC. But he began the occupation of Slovakia by arms in mid-November and the SNC was forced to dissolve.

The new government of the CSR in Prague confronted the problems of securing Slovakia and of the demarcation of the new border with Hungary. They decided to solve these problems by themselves instead through the SNC.

On December 10th, 1918, the “Ministry for the Administration of Slovakia (hereafter, the Ministry for Slovakia)” was established as a *de facto* Slovak government and V. Šrobár was appointed to be “Minister with Full Powers for Slovakia

(hereafter, the Slovak Minister).” Being supported by a number of the armed units, he started his task of governing Slovakia and consolidating its relationship with the Czech Lands. At the same time, E. Beneš, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, negotiated with the leaders of the Allies several issues, one of which was to demarcate the new border with Hungary. As a result, according to the note from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France on December 24th, 1918, which was handed to the government of Hungary, the provisional line of demarcation that based on the demand of Beneš was decided.

By the end of December 1918, the Czechoslovak army occupied all of Slovakia, that is, the territory to the north of the provisional line of demarcation.

The new border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary was fixed and internationally approved by the Treaty of Trianon that was signed in June 1920. It was fundamentally based on the provisional line of demarcation of December 1918.

In parallel with the action to incorporate Slovakia into the CSR, the government of the CSR began the building and the unification of the local administrative system.

In the beginning of 1919, the government of the CSR prepared the original plan for the reform of the local administrative system and submitted it to the National Assembly. On February 29th, 1920, the National Assembly passed this County Act, together with other important laws, including the Constitution of the CSR.

In this law, the government of the CSR rejected the Austrian province as a unit of administration and adopted the new unit, namely the County (*župa*). It planned to divide the territory of the CSR, except Ruthenia, the easternmost part of the inter-war CSR, into 21 counties, six of which would be established in the area of “Slovakia.”

But the County Act was put into operation only in Slovakia from January 1st, 1923. It meant that Slovakia was divided into counties and subordinated to the government, while Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia preserved their entity as an administrative unit. Although the Ministry of Slovakia continued its activity as the only organization that exercised jurisdiction over the whole territory of Slovakia, its competence was reduced step-by-step. This administrative system was maintained until 1928.

As a conclusion of this chapter, it must be confirmed that, at the point of the independence of the CSR, Slovakia did not exist as an administrative unit. Moreover, the precise territory of “Slovakia” and its boundary were defined through the effort to demarcate the border with Hungary. And Czech politicians, one of whom was E. Beneš, achieved it.

## **2. The Slovak People’s Party and its First Bill for the Autonomy of Slovakia**

The two regions that composed the CSR after 1918, namely the Czech Lands and Slovakia (and Ruthenia), had had different histories. That is why their social structures, as well as economic powers, were differentiated.

As a result, immediately after its foundation, the CSR had to deal with a lot of problems that stemmed from these regional differences. The "Slovak Question," the general term for these problems, contained many aspects related to social, economic, religious, educational and other spheres. During the inter-war period, the governments of the CSR could not fill these regional gaps between the Czech Lands and Slovakia, although they implemented many measures to rectify them. The Slovak Question became the source of disappointment and dissatisfaction among the Slovaks with the governments and the CSR itself.

The Slovak People's Party (SPP) spoke for the Slovaks under these conditions. The SPP demanded the autonomy of Slovakia as the solution to the Slovak Question and succeeded in gaining support among the Slovaks. The SPP won the most votes in Slovakia in three elections for the members of the National Assembly (held in 1925, 1929 and 1935). But the SPP remained in opposition except for the period from January 1927 to October 1929.

The demands of the SPP for Slovak autonomy had several bases. One of them was the right of self-determination of the Slovak nation. It provided a theoretical basis. But it was the Pittsburgh Agreement that provided a political and more important basis for the SPP.

The Pittsburgh Agreement was concluded between Czech and Slovak organizations in the U.S.A. on May 30th, 1918. In this agreement, they approved the foundation of the Czechoslovak State, but, at the same time, confirmed that Slovakia would have its own administration, diet and courts, and the Slovak language would be the official language in Slovakia. T.G. Masaryk, who became the first president of the CSR, helped to draft this agreement and signed it. It was his signature that made the Pittsburgh Agreement legitimate and problematic. The SPP considered this agreement as a pledge of the future president. They condemned non-fulfillment of this agreement and used it as a basis for Slovak autonomy.

The SPP submitted the first bill for the autonomy of Slovakia to the National Assembly in 1922. Before its submission, some tentative plans were drawn up and the SPP discussed them.

At first, in April 1921, Vojtech Tuka published his own plan in the SPP's organ, *Slovák*. Tuka's plan proposed to reorganize the CSR into the "Czecho-Slovak Federal Republic" that would be comprised of the "Czech Republic," the "Slovak Republic" and Ruthenia. And two nations, namely the Czechs and the Slovaks, would have exercised virtually unlimited sovereignty over their own "republic." The only standing organization of the Federation would have been the common President. The concrete adjustment for the management of the Federation would have been dealt with according to agreements between the two republics. Tuka planned the reorganization of the CSR into a confederation of two *de facto* independent states.

But Tuka's plan could not gain support even within the SPP. The mainstream of the SPP considered his plan to be too radical and requested Ludovít Labaj to make a counterproposal. Labaj's plan proposed to divide the "Czecho-Slovak Republic"

into three regions, namely the Czech Lands, Slovakia and Ruthenia. Within the framework of this "C-SR," Slovakia would have had self-government and the Slovak Diet and would have implemented self-governance in internal affairs. Labaj's plan, however, was very different from Tuka's plan about the structure of the state and the status of Slovakia within the "C-SR." Labaj's plan presupposed the existence of a common Czecho-Slovak government that would conduct common affairs, although it required that one third of the members of the common cabinet should have been Slovaks. It became the basis of the first bill for Slovak autonomy. After arranging its style as a bill and correcting some points, the SPP submitted the bill for Slovak autonomy to the National Assembly on January 25th, 1922.

The points that were shared among these three plans were the basis of the demand for Slovak autonomy and the method with which the territory of the CSR would be divided. In these plans, the SPP demanded the division in accordance with the principle of self-determination of nations. They argued that Slovaks should have exercised their sovereignty over Slovakia.

Moreover, here, it is necessary to focus on the way of defining the territory of "Slovakia" and its boundaries. All of these three autonomy plans used the provisions of the Treaty of Trianon to define Slovakia. It meant that, in 1922, the SPP had to make Slovakia and had to cite the provisions of the Treaty of Trianon which was concluded under the initiative of Czech politicians, since Slovakia did not exist as an administrative unit in the CSR.

Although the SPP's first bill for Slovak autonomy could not win support among other parties and was abandoned, this bill became the model for the other autonomy bills that were submitted to the National Assembly in 1930 and 1938.

### **3. The Reform of the Local Administrative system in 1928. – The Establishment of the Provinces**

The CSR built a centralized administrative system. It was partly based on the County Act that was put into operation only in Slovakia. In the mid-1920s, the argument about the reorganization of the administrative system surfaced again. It led to the adoption of the "Act on the Organization of Political Administration" in 1927 and the implementation of the new administrative system based on this law in the whole territory of the CSR. In relation to the interest of this paper, it must be pointed out that from January 1927 to October 1929, the SPP joined the coalition cabinets and supported the adoption of this law.

The participation of the SPP in the coalition cabinets and the change of its composition resulted from the election to the National Assembly held in 1925. The Czechoslovak Social Democrats that had been members of the coalition cabinets since 1918 lost this election. The election weakened the position of the Social Democrats in the coalition cabinet and caused political instability.

Milan Hodža, who temporarily took over the direction of the Agrarian Party, which was the pillar of the coalition cabinets in the inter-war CSR. He had to prepare for the formation of a new coalition cabinet.

Hodža was one of the most prominent Slovak politician in the inter-war CSR. He had been demanding the decentralization of the administration in terms of "regionalism." His regionalism coincided with the requests for Slovak autonomy of the SPP on the point that both demanded the enlargement of the competence of the administrative bodies in Slovakia. His theoretical basis, however, was clearly different from that of the SPP, for Hodža approved the idea of "Czechoslovakism" and recognized its validity.

In the first half of 1926 Hodža strove to organize a new coalition cabinet which the SPP and some conservative parties of Germans should join in place of the Social Democrats.

On October 12th, 1926, the new coalition cabinet headed by A. Švehla was formed. But the negotiation between the SPP and the coalition continued, because the SPP did not join it immediately. In this negotiation, at first, the SPP required that the competence of the Slovak Minister should be enlarged and that a member of the SPP should hold this office.

The coalition cabinet would not approve the demand of the SPP. At last the SPP accepted the plan of the coalition cabinet for the reform of the local administrative system and joined the coalition cabinet on January 15th, 1927.

On July 14th, 1927, the National Assembly adopted the "Act on the Organization of Political Administration (hereafter, the Organization Act)." This Act was put into operation in Slovakia and Ruthenia on July 1st and in the Czech Lands on December 1st, 1928.

In accordance with the Organization Act, a new local administrative system based on provinces was implemented. The whole territory of the CSR was divided into four Provinces: Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, Slovakia and Ruthenia. In Slovakia, the six counties were abolished, and the newly established Slovak Province, the *Krajina Slovenska*, succeeded to the affairs of the former counties.

Each province had its own Provincial Office as an administrative body and the government appointed Provincial Presidents, who were state bureaucrats, as chiefs of these offices. On the other hand, a Provincial Council (*zemské zastupiteľstvo*) was established in each province, as what is called a "local assembly", to absorb the opinion of the inhabitants about the administration. The Provincial Council had the competence to discuss the economic, social and cultural matters of the province and to settle them. But they could not deal with "political matters." Moreover, the chairman of the Provincial Council was the Provincial President. He had the authority to control the deliberations of the Provincial Council, to convoke and even to dissolve it whenever he wanted.

The Organization Act installed the system by which the state gained supremacy over the provinces and was regarded as the accomplishment of the building of the

centralized administrative system in the inter-war CSR. The competence and significance of the provinces were apparently different from that demanded by the SPP in their bill for the autonomy of Slovakia.

Here several questions appear. Why did the SPP, which had been requesting the autonomy of Slovakia and had recognized the nature of the new system, support the adoption of the Organization Act and implementation of it? And what benefits did they find in it?

#### **4. The Meaning of the Slovak Province for the Slovak People's Party**

In order to solve these questions, it is necessary to focus on the demands that the SPP presented at the negotiation about their participation in the coalition cabinet from October 1926 to January 1927. In the first half of chapter 4, using the articles of the SPP's organ, *Slovák*, which reported on this negotiation, the author analyses the contents and the meaning of their demands during this period.

At the beginning of the negotiation the SPP demanded the enlargement of the competence of the Slovak Minister and his Ministry. However it seemed to be inconsistent with their official demands for Slovak autonomy, since these organizations stemmed from the facts that, at the foundation of the CSR, Slovakia had not existed as an administrative unit, and that the Slovaks did not have the ability to govern themselves.

It was the opposite interpretation that the SPP gave to the Slovak Minister and his Ministry. It considered them as the symbol of the existence of Slovakia as an equivalent territorial unit to Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. Moreover, for the SPP, this "Slovakia" was the territory of the Slovak nation, rather than a mere administrative unit, and the Slovak Minister who should have regained his original competence was the representative of the Slovak nation. The SPP intended to usurp the "Minister with Full Powers for Slovakia" and the "Ministry for Administration of Slovakia" and to exploit them as the temporary organization that should have implemented the autonomy of Slovakia.

That was the very interpretation that the Czech politicians had feared when the Ministry for Slovakia and the Slovak Minister had been established in December 1918. As a logical result, the coalition cabinet refused to maintain the Ministry for Slovakia and the SPP had to admit the plan of the coalition cabinet.

The SPP, however, could find some benefits for itself in the original plan of the Organization Act. It focused on the fact that this bill provided for the establishment of the Slovak Province, the *Krajina Slovenska*, as an administrative unit for the first time. Although the SPP had an objection against the actual competence that was given to the provincial organizations, especially to the Provincial Council, it did set a high evaluation on the establishment of the Slovak Province itself because that meant the recognition of Slovakia.

The SPP described the Slovak Province as "the seed" or "the first flash" for autonomy. It meant that it did not consider this new provincial system as the perma-

nent administrative system, namely, the everlasting solution of the "Slovak Question," but as a provisional system that would provide the framework for the future autonomy of Slovakia. In relation to it, it must be pointed out that the SPP never demanded the adoption of its first bill for the autonomy of Slovakia at the negotiations with the coalition cabinet.

This evaluation of the provincial system by the SPP was reflected in the bills of the SPP for autonomy for Slovakia that were submitted to the National Assembly in 1930 and 1938.

The autonomy bill of 1938 was composed of 21 articles and dealt only with the reorganization of the Slovak Province. According to it, the Provincial Council should become the Slovak Diet that would have the legislative right. And the Slovak self-government would exercise the administrative powers in Slovakia.

The points in common between the autonomy bill of 1938 and that of 1922 were that both presupposed the existence of a central government in Prague, and that both gave to Slovakia a special position as an autonomous province in the CSR against the Czech Lands. In this sense, the autonomy bill of 1938 succeeded to the provisions of that of 1922. The method used for the definition of the territory and the boundary of Slovakia in these two bills was, however, apparently different. In comparison with the autonomy bill of 1922, which cited the Treaty of Trianon for it, the bill of 1938 prescribed that the whole territory of the Slovak Province would become the Slovak Autonomous Province. In other words, in 1938, the SPP needed only to demand the reorganization of the existing administrative body and to enlarge its competence, whereas, in 1922, they had to define "Slovakia" as a new administrative unit. On this point, we found the influence of the Organization Act and of the establishment of the Slovak Province on the SPP.

The plan of the government to reform the administrative system was affected by the Organization Act as well. In 1938 the coalition cabinet headed by M. Hodža published its own plan that demanded the decentralization of the administration through the expansion of the competence of each province.

After the Organisation Act recognized the existence of Slovakia in the administrative system, both the SPP and the governments thought of it as a matter of course and adopted it as the presupposition of their reform plans.

On October 6th, 1938, the SPP and other parties that had acted in Slovakia proclaimed the establishment of the *de facto* Slovak Autonomous Province that was based on the bill of the SPP for the autonomy of Slovakia and was under their leadership. The SPP's bill was formally adopted by the National Assembly on November 22nd, 1938.

Here the fact must be recalled that, at the point of the foundation of the CSR, Slovakia as an administrative unit did not exist and even had no clear boundary.

The author would conclude that, during the period of the first CSR, Slovakia was created and its validity was recognized in the administration. Twenty years



from the foundation of the CSR, Slovakia gained enough identity to become a body of self-governance. It was the adoption of the Organization Act of 1927 that proved to be the turning point in this process of formation of Slovakia. In this law, the existence of Slovakia in the administrative system was formally recognised for the first time and it has never been denied since.

In addition, it was not the SPP, but the governments of the CSR that took the initiative in this process of creating Slovakia. Taking it into consideration, it is possible to say that Slovak nationalism was affected by the activities of the governments of the CSR in its fundamentals, namely the definition of the territory where they should exercise their sovereignty.

To conclude, the author must say several things. In this paper, the mere plans and the provisions of laws were dealt with. In the future, the description of the reality and the problems of these above-mentioned administrative systems; for example, the activities of the Provincial Council in Slovakia as well as its continuity with the Slovak Diet in the "Slovak State" will be the focus and subjects.

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