

TRACING THE SIGN *NÁROD* IN POLITICAL THINKING IN POST-TOTALITARIAN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: This paper sets out to examine political thinking in post-totalitarian Slovakia. Using the discourse theory and signification of Laclau and Mouffe, it considers the sign *národ* (a specific conception of the Slovak nation) in relation to democracy and the EU. Seeking to pinpoint political thinking amongst the general populace, it bases its analysis on an examination of newspaper articles on “Building the State” published in the 1990s. It traces the roots of the sign from the 1960s to the present day and predicts that the EU signifier will impact on the content of the floating signifier of *národ*.

Keywords: discourse theory, Slovak politics, *národ*, signifier, post-totalitarian.

Introduction

Regime change, whether intended or unintended, from above or below, internal or external, exposes the society in question to the instabilities and vagaries of the political actors waiting on the side-lines to take control. Whether we can learn from the individual experiences of those societies which have already undergone such a process is of course highly questionable. At best, perhaps, we can trace the political thinking that goes on to shape the future of that society as it emerges along the initial transitional path from totalitarian state. That is what I hope to achieve in this paper, which examines anti-totalitarian political thinking in Slovakia in the 1990s following the collapse of the communist regime. My aim is to examine a particular strand of political thought from the perspective of discourse theory (Mouffe, Žižek, etc).

Discourse analysis is useful as it allows us to examine the context and ideas rather than the people. In this way it may provide a snapshot of the various strands of political thinking. By political thought and political thinking I do not mean erudite learning but rather the general thinking expressed within a society concerning the politics of that society and the form that society should adopt. In this respect, I consider one of the most salient “signs” in Slovak political thinking to have emerged in the post-totalitarian era: *národ*, a specific conception of the Slovak nation. By establishing the way in which this sign emerged, the form it developed, and the nature of its trajectory, we may well glean some pointers as to how signs emerge in societies in transition and how that might develop over time.

I begin with a brief consideration of anti- and post-totalitarianism, before turning to an overview of dislocation and signification and the trajectory of *národ* in Slovak political thinking with a view to drawing preliminary conclusions as to what this might be able to tell us about political thinking in post-totalitarian societies.

Anti-totalitarianism and Post-totalitarianism

“Anti-” constructs are by their very nature defined in opposition to their namesakes—in this (Slovak) case, communism as totalitarianism—and as such find their impulses in reaction to the state they seek to destroy/escape. Thus, the anti-totalitarian “is a friend of liberal democracy” (Podoksik 2008, 209). Although Podoksik did not have Slovakia in mind, I think friendship is a rather nice way of looking at it. The enemy was Communist—known, feared and rejected. The new friend (perhaps more of an acquaintance) lived next door over The Wall and was to be embraced, emulated. Anti-totalitarian thinking in the Slovak context can be located temporally to the immediate post-1989 period, existing solely in reaction to what had gone before. Post-totalitarian thought, as I see it, is political thinking on the system that replaces the previous totalitarian one. A post-totalitarian regime is thus one that has undergone transition to a non-totalitarian regime. Note that is close to Goldfarb’s notion that a “post-totalitarian terrain” lies “[b]etween the totalitarian past and the prospects for a democratic future” (Goldfarb 1991, ix). There is of course no guarantee that anti-totalitarianism will become post-totalitarianism; although that is exactly what did happen in Slovakia. Let us now turn to look at discourse theory and how it might help us trace the signs that constitute the emerging post-totalitarian political thought.

Dislocation

Dislocation refers to a deep crisis that ruptures society. This crisis emerges because of the failure of ideology and the collapse of hegemony. Ideologies are in effect unachievable visions of the future. The crisis or dislocation occurs at the point where it becomes clear that perceived reality and ideological vision conflict to the extent that the ideology becomes untenable. This results in an identity crisis as society seeks to resolve the dilemma. Members of that society become aware of a “lack” associated with the rift caused by dislocation. Dislocation is followed by a desire to re-establish the closure of political order through the emergence of new ideologies. It is through these ideologies that attempts to suture the dislocation or rectify the lack are made. New meaning and ideas are conveyed through signifiers—the building blocks of political thought (Torfing 1999, 62, 115; Howarth et al. 2000; Nabers 2009 and 2007).

Signifiers as the Building Blocks of Political Thought

Signifiers indicate meaning; it is through signifiers that we are able to share concepts. The concept is signified by the signifier. Thus, political thought is made up of signifiers. There are two fundamental kinds of signifiers. The most important is an empty signifier that operates as a nodal point. An empty signifier signifies absence: the absence or lack that is

noted at the point of dislocation. As Laclau puts it: “in a situation of radical disorder order is present as that which is absent” (Howarth et al. 2000, 8). The nodal point is critical as it “creates and sustains the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings” (Torfing 1999, 98). Floating signifiers then acquire specific meaning as a result of their proximity to the nodal point. To use Žižek’s example: “when we quilt the floating signifier through “communism”, for example, “class struggle” confers a precise and fixed signification to all other elements: to democracy (so-called “real democracy” as opposed to bourgeois formal democracy as a legal form of exploitation)” (Žižek in Torfing 1999, 99). The nodal point is therefore key to decoding the essence of political thought. A fully articulated chain of signifiers is required before society can be successfully hegemonised. One way of analysing political thought would be to trace the path of empty and floating signifiers and the way in which meaning is articulated. In this brief paper, I am interested particularly in two signifiers that constitute post-totalitarian political thought: democracy and *národ* (although of course there are many others). If we return now to Slovakia in 1989 and the end of totalitarianism we can begin to analyse the chain of thought.

The Building Blocks of Slovak Political Thought: democracy and *národ*

The dislocation associated with the emergence of new post-totalitarian political thought in Slovakia is clearly that of the collapse of communism. Suddenly, the left (in all its variations) floundered and both the required space and lack were created. The revolutions that occurred in central and eastern Europe in 1989 took place against a backdrop of grass-roots activism in the form of religious groups, ecological activists and student groups that paved the way for transition (Skilling 1989; Kenney, 2002). Actually guiding the transition, however, required a much bigger leap of faith. A society in transition is immediately faced with the most basic of questions: Who are we? What do we want? What kind of a society do we want to live in? Transition (rather unsurprisingly but all the same worth noting) involves a hazy journey from one (known) state to another (imagined) state—imagined, since we cannot know for sure whether we will achieve the end product that we envisage. That imagination is so often constructed in opposition to what “was”.

Democracy as Signifier

One of the first contenders to fill the ideological gap created by the collapse of communism was democracy—the contemporary antithesis to communism. As a nodal point or empty signifier, democracy came to structure the discursive field. It was a sign associated with the mobilisation of the masses and went uncontested, agreed on by the mass Slovak public and all the political parties. We might note that for many it was a very vague concept indeed. This is unsurprising given that as an empty signifier, it “signifies a logically unattainable universality” (Nabers 2005, 196). The less the content is analysed the better. No government can claim to operate on behalf of *all* the people (Laclau 2000). All the political parties claimed adherence to (liberal) democratic ideals and *democracy* as the nodal point of the discourse system anchored the other signifiers. It is for this reason that democracy is central to political thinking in Slovakia; however, my interest primarily

lies in a second signifier that relates to the initial question confronting the populace post-1989: who are we?

***Národ* as Signifier**

While *liberal* democracy was to be contrasted with *people's* democracy, the abandonment of *international* communism was accompanied by an embracing of *national* democracies. The other signifier that is of interest to us here is that of *národ*—signifying a particular conception of the Slovak nation. While *democracy* functions as the empty signifier anchoring the discursive field in terms of a hegemonic acceptance by all agreeing that this is an appropriate and achievable state of society, *národ* is a floating signifier and as such can mean different things to different people and at different times (Nabers 2007, 23). We all believe we belong to one nation or another; yet, we may all have different notions of what that nation is despite agreeing that we belong to the same nation.

Národ in post-totalitarian Slovakia is a contested sign. From the initial collapse of communism, through the processes of gaining independence and accession to the EU, *národ* has been an important floating signifier in the discursive field, and indeed remains so today. In terms of the political spectrum, *národ* has been a factor shaping party politics with the more radical fleshed-out variant representing a significant political rallying point for political parties such as the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Movement for a Democratic Society (HZDS) and a weaker form for Smer [Direction] (See Haughton and Rybář 2008, 235-239 and Henderson 2010 for an overview of party politics from 2000). We shall begin by focusing on that strong radical version.

***Národ* Enters the Discursive Field**

The signifier *národ* (like democracy) did not just appear out of the blue in 1989, but had been a recurring theme appearing at moments when the discursive field was being contested under communism. In the late 1960s during the reformist Prague Spring when it seemed there might be an opportunity for the Slovaks to influence the nature of the federation between the Czechs and Slovaks, we see *národ* being signified. While we are interested here in the signs, we cannot dismiss the role of political actors. Human agency is a factor, for ideas require their propagators. We find a handful of writers being preoccupied with propagating a strong version of *národ* in both the late 1960s and the early 1990s, for instance Vladimír Mináč and Vladimír Ferko (the latter become an adherent of HZDS). Robert Pynsent focuses on this temporal connection when he describes Mináč and Ferko as atavist nationalists; Mináč as a historical atavist and Ferko as an active atavist (Pynsent 1998). Nonetheless their conceptions of *národ* draw on the same historical myth and most importantly their ideas were picked up on by various political parties in the 1990s and can still be found in conceptions of Slovak culture and the history taught in Slovak schools today. Tracing *národ* over the last twenty-years, we see its saliency peaking at such times as when Slovakia gained independence, during the third Mečiar government of 1995-1998 (known for its illiberal approach to democracy and controversial policies regarding the minorities in Slovakia), with the language law and the law on Matica slovenská adopted in 1995, and most recently

regarding the Hungarian Law on Citizenship introduced in January 2011. Thus, *národ* is important as it continues to inform Slovak politics and thought. That is not to suggest that it is a static presence in Slovak political discourse. As a floating signifier it interacts and combines with other signifiers and therefore its contents may alter and indeed have altered over time. This leads us to the rather interesting question of how it might develop and what might influence it. In order even to contemplate these questions we must first determine what the (strong/radical) content of *národ* signifies.

The Signified

In this section I trace the contents of *národ* as espoused by that section of the political spectrum represented by HZDS and Smer.¹ *Národ* initially surfaced in relation to questions over the future of the federation and Slovak statehood. So how is *národ* conceived? It is worth quoting Vladimír Mináč to get a sense of this conception. Interestingly, this quote is from an article first published in 1965 and reprinted again in 1997.

[i]n the beginning was the word, and the word was with Štúr. Our national history is not primarily that of great historical upheaval, nor of military social or political change; it is the written word that lies uppermost in our history (Mináč 1997, 76).

It is of great significance that Mináč replaces God with Štúr. Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856) is portrayed as a national hero associated with defending the rights of the Slovaks under Hungarian rule and most importantly with codifying the Slovak language. This linguistic definition of that nation and the legacy of Štúr is articulated in both periods is implicit in both weak and strong versions of *národ* and is the default conception in Slovakia today. It is worth citing here another (prolific and sometimes quite rabid) propagator of *národ* who wrote extensively on the theme in the 1990s. Dušan Slobodník claims that “[l]anguage became the cement that bonded the elements of the nation together” (Slobodník 2000, 52). The continued saliency of this interpretation is emphasised in words uttered in 2010 by the then Prime Minister, Robert Fico. In March 2010, Hungarian President László Sólyom argued that Slovak pupils whose mother tongue was Hungarian should be taught Slovak as a foreign language and not as a mother tongue. Robert Fico, at that time Slovak Prime Minister reacted furiously by saying it was an attempt “to break up the Slovak Republic and the fundamental elements of statehood” (Hanus 2010). This linguistic conception of the nation is clearly one of longevity. Before we consider whether this is likely to remain the case and why, let us examine how the signifier *národ* operates in the Slovak discursive field.

There are many sources to which we could turn to for our analysis of *národ*. One of the more interesting is a series of articles that appeared between June and October 1993 in one of the daily newspapers, *Republika* (read primarily by the HZDS and SNS electorate), not long after Slovakia gained independence, entitled “Building the State” (Šrámek 1999). Given that we are not concerned with academic thought, newspapers are an ideal source of

¹ The analysis is part of the doctoral research I conducted on the HZDS using discourse analysis on the images in the media projected by the party and those who supported it (Menzies, 2004).

the ideas circulating amongst the general populace at a given time. The aim of this particular series was to consider how the intellectuals should approach their role in the building of the new state. The context is important because it gives us an insight into how *národ* impacts on visions of the future and the nature of the state. This is particularly important given that, as we have seen, *národ* is often conflated with state. Despite purporting to be about visions of the new state, most of the articles set about defending the emergence of the independent republic in January 1993. But this in itself is key for two reasons.

Firstly, because for a society to be perceived as a society, it must be able to “forge an image of its unity” (Norval 2000, 220). The formation of political frontiers enables members of the society to discern where that society begins and ends. The logics of equivalence and of difference are used to draw these frontiers. The logic of equivalence involves the construction of “a chain of equivalential identities among different elements that are seen as expressing a certain sameness” (Torfing 1991, 301). Most of the articles in “Building the State” do precisely this by pinpointing enemies of the Slovak nation (quite vociferously and rather dogmatically at times). Thus, Czechoslovakists and “maďarons”² are to be condemned, while the loyalty of the Slovak intelligentsia is to be commended. While both logics of equivalence and difference are to be found in all societies, the dominance of one tends to characterise that society. A dominating logic of equivalence leads to polarisation. Thus, we should not be surprised to learn that Slovakia in the 1990s was a highly polarised society. Since 1998 and the commitment to EU membership this has receded somewhat (See Henderson 2001 on the significance of the EU), but underlying tension is quick to emerge when the sign is contested.

Secondly, *národ* (in both its weak and strong articulations) is by its very nature defensive, having emerged in reaction to external events and as a way of distinguishing the Slovaks as being different from Czechs and Hungarians. This means that it is unable to offer a forward-looking vision but refers instead to a distilled and interpreted past. Arguably, this aspect may well determine the future content of *národ*. Let us now return to the series of articles “Building the State” in search of what *národ* signified to the Slovak reader in 1993.

What dominates in this series is a rather teleological perspective—“[t]he republic emerged, because emerge it had to” (Červenák 1993). Independence is portrayed as a natural progression from the heroic attempts of their (Slovak) ancestors to battle for an identity until finally statehood is achieved: “for Slovakia finally understands the meaning of her own history” (Solivajsová 1993). The over-riding impression one has after reading the series is one of a collective on the defence and most contributors focus on protecting the new state rather than developing it. One suspects that in some ways this question is addressed much more easily. Nonetheless, this perspective is not simply associated with the authors writing in *Republika*, but is characteristic of *národ* as a whole. The interesting thing about this series of articles is that despite the title, state and *národ* are never clearly defined; the reader is clearly expected to know what *národ* signifies. It is to those writing about history that we shall have to turn to for that. There is another important point here: what is the relationship between *národ* and state?

² Maďaron originally referred to a Slovak loyal to Hungary during the time of the Kingdom of Hungary. Its use is generally highly derogatory.

Národ as History

For Mináč and Slobodník, *národ* signifies a people defined by the language they speak, but that language is also a symbol of the character or essence of the people. The values of the Slovak people are based on that character, which is peasant, rural and natural and to be contrasted with civic, cosmopolitan and artificial constructions. Folk culture and tradition are emphasised to the extent that the core nation—organic and natural—is portrayed as something to be defended, preserved and according to its traditions, as unchanging and a constant in the chaos of the modern world (Pynsent 1998, 281-282; Slobodník 2000 and 1998). For some *národ* is also Christian, since the two Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius sought to spread the word of God in Old Church Slavonic. There have been rather dubious attempts to claim that “Cyril and Methodius translated their works into the language of Rastislav’s Slovaks” (Rastislav was ruler of Great Moravia between 830 and 896 and present-day Slovakia occupies some of this territory). The quotation relates to a history book by Milan Ďurica who was a highly controversial historian with radical views (Ďurica 1998, 23). Yet we also find *Proglas* Saint Cyril’s preface to the gospels is described as the “oldest Slovak and Slav poem” in a collection of documents marking Slovak statehood (*Dokumenty*, 1998). Thus, we can see that the defensive image of *národ* is based on language, religion and historical roots. It is also one that is arrived at (particularly the historical roots) with some stretch of the imagination. We might ask what this means for the lifespan of *národ*.

This highly creative and radical stream of political thinking was encouraged by parties such as the HZDS and SNS and given that five of the ten Ministers of Education since 1993 have been SNS or HZDS party members, education has been particularly imbued with this notion. Research by Deborah Michaels indicates that the textbooks used in Slovak schools tend to focus on this linguistic definition of the nation and blur the concept of state and nation, encouraging the idea that minority groups whose mother tongue is not Slovak are not considered to be an equal part of that state. What is particularly interesting about Michaels’ findings is that although Slovak schools cover civic concepts, they teach them from a theoretical perspective and do not consider how these notions might be applied to Slovakia (Michaels 2009).

Národ therefore signifies a conception of the nation that is contested by the multinational nature of the Slovak state. There are significant Roma and Hungarian communities. The empty signifier of democracy, however, influences interpretations of *národ*. This was particularly evident in the late 1990s when HZDS conceptions of democracy lost out to the stronger liberal democratic signifier which is now an unquestionable component of Slovak political discourse. Nonetheless, it is clear that stronger versions of *národ* and equality continue to conflict. The furore over a law adopted by the Fico government in 2010 in reaction to the Hungarian Law on Citizenship, giving members of the Hungarian minorities in other states the right to apply for Hungarian citizenship if they can prove linguistic and family ties is an example. The hastily passed Slovak law means that citizens who apply for citizenship of another country will automatically lose their Slovak citizenship. The media has made much of the fact that since the introduction of the new law in July 2010, thirty-two Slovaks have lost their Slovak citizenship, yet only one had applied for Hungarian citizenship, suggesting that the loss of some citizens is more problematic than others. Pavol Lukáč makes

the important point that Slovak politics dealt for a long time only with its Hungarian and Czech neighbours (Lukáč 2007, 341). The linguistic definition of *národ* thus emerged as a means of defining the “other”. It does seem to be the case that it is specifically in connection with anything Hungarian that illiberal responses are triggered. If *národ* emerged in reaction to specific historical events, will it continue to suture the discursive field?

The Future of *národ*?

Lukáč predicted that having become a member of the EU, Slovakia would then continue on a “post-nationalist” path (Lukáč 2007, 341). There has undoubtedly been a softening of the rhetoric. And one of the strongest new signifiers to have emerged of late is the “EU”. Membership of the EU and the Eurozone, the desire to be considered a truly “European” state with “European” values has had a major impact on Slovak political discourse (Henderson 2001), with Slovaks trusting European institutions far more than their own (*Eurobarometer* 2010). The content of the EU signifier, particularly in terms of political maturity and belonging clearly conflicts with that of *národ*. The new global context, the increasing numbers of foreigners in Slovakia, intermarriages etc. all challenge the current conceptions of *národ*. There are many other more inclusive readings of Slovak history that emphasise rather than suppress the multi-ethnic past of Slovakia (See for example, Salner 1998 and Bugge 2004 on the Slovakization of Bratislava), but these have yet to challenge *národ*. We have already noted that some aspects of *národ*, such as the historical roots are unconvincing. The post-totalitarian trajectory of *národ* has been fairly consistent over time, waxing and waning in response to the political flavour of the government in power at the time. We have already seen a shift towards a weaker version of *národ* and the presence ascendancy of signifiers like the EU suggests that there will be a re-quilting of *národ*.

Conclusion

This paper set out to look briefly at Slovak political thinking in the post-totalitarian era. Using discourse theory as a means of identifying salient signifiers suturing the discourse field, the paper establishes that Slovak political thinking is influenced by three key signs: democracy, *národ* and the EU. Of these, *národ*, essentially a rather retrospective linguistically defined conception of the nation/state, dominated and polarised the political scene in the first ten years of post-totalitarianism, but is now beginning to find that it is being challenged when in close proximity to other signifiers such as democracy and the EU. The author expects that this will increasingly be the case and that we may see *národ* evolving due to the presence of the EU signifier in particular. What discourse analysis shows us is that by analysing the discursive field we can track the signs that emerge in the anti-totalitarian period and analyse and perhaps even predict the ways in which these might interact to shape post-totalitarian political thinking.

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