

Slovak-United States Relations: Optimism for the Future

Thomas P. Melady

Senior Diplomat in Residence, Institute of World Politics

United States Ambassador to the Holy See, 1989-1993

United States Ambassador to Uganda, 1972-1973

United States Ambassador to Burundi, 1969-1972

Senior Advisor to the United States Delegation to the

United Nations General Assembly

President Emeritus of Sacred Heart University

Former United States Assistant Secretary for Post Secondary Education

What a difference a few years can make. I visited Slovakia in 1991 shortly after the collapse of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. While there was overwhelming enthusiasm among most of the people for the new freedom from Soviet domination, there still seemed to be a factor that was missing.

Slovakia had been a nation—a community of people with their own culture and traditions—for centuries. However, with the exception of the World War II period (1939-1945) when their state was a puppet of Nazi Germany, the Slovak people never had their own state. This all changed in 1993 when the leadership of the Czechs and the Slovaks peacefully arranged for the dissolution of the Federal Republic, and that same year the Slovak Republic was born.



Source: http://www.go.hrw.com/atlas/norm_map/slovakia.gif

In my July 2003 visit to Slovakia, the eagerness of the people for a pro-United States (US) position was evident. In my opinion, one reason for the very good current relations between the US and the Slovak Republic can be attributed to the new Slovak leadership. Another is the friendly attitude of Slovaks toward Americans.

Rudolph Schuster, elected President in 1999 by direct elections, also has influenced a pro-US foreign policy in Slovakia. This country backed the US in the Iraq war. In the middle of the Iraq hostilities, President Schuster said, “The US, for us, will be a strategic partner, in the future too.”

The process of change had begun a year earlier. The new governing team emerged victorious in September 1998 through a four party center-right coalition. Mikulas Dzurinda was elected Prime Minister and remains the head of government to this day.

Recent History

Located in Central Europe, Slovakia's 48,845 square kilometers make it equivalent to twice the size of New Hampshire. Slovaks comprise over 85 percent of the population of 5.4 million. Hungarians account for ten percent and the gypsy/Romany community register around two percent. The official language is Slovak with the Hungarian community also speaking Hungarian.

Religion plays an important role in the culture of the Slovak people. Catholics constitute the overwhelming majority with Protestants and Evangelicals also present in significant numbers. There are only a few thousand Jews in Slovakia today. The Nazis deported almost 75,000 Slovak Jews to concentration camps during World War II where most of them died.

Following almost ten centuries of Hungarian domination, the Slovak community in the 19th century experienced a rebirth of interest in its own culture, language and literature. This awakening energized the development of a Slovak national conscience.

The Vatican has always been well connected to the Slovak people because of the strong presence of Catholicism in the country. I had direct personal experience with this in late 1992 when senior officials in the Department of State indicated to me (I was then the US Ambassador to the Vatican) their concern about the split under consideration in Czechoslovakia. Vatican officials made their position clear to me; they felt that the Slovak people had the right to their own state. There was no hesitation in the Vatican's recognition of Slovak independence on January 1, 1993.

Modern Slovak State

The roots of the movement of the Slovak people for independence gained momentum in World War I. The Slovak diaspora was especially active in promoting the concept of a Czech-Slovak republic.

As the Austro-Hungarian Empire began to disintegrate in 1917-1918 and it became apparent that the US and its European allies would emerge as the victors in World War I, communities of Slovaks living abroad in France, Russia, and the US began actively lobbying for an independent state.

President Wilson supported the wishes of both the Czech and Slovak peoples for independence. He also believed that they should be united in one federal republic. In 1918, the Slovaks joined their long-time neighbors and formed Czechoslovakia.

World War II

The Czech-Slovak union lasted until the eve of World War II in 1939. Following the 1938 Munich Agreement where Czechoslovakia lost territory to Nazi Germany, Slovakia declared its autonomy within a federal state.

As Adolph Hitler's troops were entering Czech lands in March 1939, Slovakia declared its independence. It almost immediately became a puppet state of Nazi Germany and subsequently entered World War II as a German supporter against the Allies. The pro-Nazi attitude of the Slovak puppet state (1939-1945) did not succeed in diminishing the pro-American attitude of most Slovaks. There is no doubt that this resulted from the approximately one million Slovaks who immigrated to the US in the preceding 100 years. The Slovak community in the US did well and was a source of financial help for their relations remaining in Slovakia.

The tragedy of the Slovak people under a Nazi puppet state did not stop with the end of World War II in 1945. Nazi oppression was soon replaced by Soviet Communist domination. Within the three years following 1945, in February 1948, the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia was complete.

The Communist domination existed from 1948 to 1989. For these 41 years, Slovakia was part of Communist-dominated Czechoslovakia. However, the Slovak people's desire for their own flag and state did not wane, and after remaining in the Czechoslovak union for a few years after the fall of Communist domination, the Slovak Republic was born on January 1, 1993.

The Cloud of Vladamir Merčiar

It was only a few years ago that the United States and most of Europe were concerned about the then Prime Minister, Vladamir Merčiar. His few years in office indicated a hyper-nationalism and a return to a socialist-centered economy.

These issues were all present in the 1999 elections in which over 75 percent of the citizens voted. Rudolph Schuster received over 57 percent of the vote. With the departure of Merčiar, it was possible to discuss a new beginning in US-Slovak relations. The people of Slovakia had a problem in terms of their acceptance by the Euro-Atlantic community. However, in endorsing the Schuster-Dzurinda administration, the Slovak people gave a clear signal that they wanted to be allied with the West.

Merčiar still represents a cloud over Slovakia. The country faces several challenges that cause alienation, and Merčiar's rhetoric could exacerbate these divisions. This could become a real problem if there is a sustained downturn in the economy and the Slovak people turned to him again for leadership.

Developments in 2003

This year, 2003, is a significant year in US-Slovak relations. On April 9, President Schuster met with President Bush at the White House. It was a successful meeting of the two chiefs of state.

A month later, on May 8, the US Senate voted to ratify the addition of seven Eastern and Central European countries, including Slovakia, to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This year also marked the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Slovak Republic. Other Slovak leaders who visited Washington in this anniversary year included the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defense. The US diplomatic presence in the celebrations included US Ambassador Ronald Weiser. Ambassador Weiser played a leading role in organizing the visit of President Schuster to Michigan where he promoted trade and investment opportunities in Slovakia.

Challenges for Slovakia

The present government is determined to establish a free enterprise economy. This path has not been easy. Many of the industrial enterprises became inefficient while protected by the old Communist system. Privatization thus resulted in some job loss.

The current government has enacted many steps to attract foreign investment, and German and US investors are responding to these opportunities. This will help to ameliorate the high unemployment in the rural areas of Slovakia.

The major exports are machinery and transport of equipment and intermediate manufactured goods. These were the focus in the Communist era. Building on that base, the government is promoting modernization and encouraging relationships with US and Western European companies. The past several years have witnessed a significant increase of activities by the Slovak Embassy to encourage US trade and investment in Slovakia.

Slovakia remains on the “unexplored” list for most travelers. From the Ukrainian border to the Czech Republic, there are numerous castles, monuments and other remembrances from previous eras. The parks and mountains are excellent attractions for nature lovers. There are also superb skiing and hiking facilities. The favorable political climate that now exists presents a very good opportunity for the government to orchestrate a strategy to market the country’s tourist attractions.

There are many opportunities for cultural and educational exchanges with Western countries. The Slovak people are proud of their cultural heritage, but it was obscured for centuries because the people did not have a state to promote their interests. Now the government should focus on furthering contact between its people and the US and other Western states. During the decades when outsiders dominated the Slovak people, it was the people of the country who maintained contact with people throughout the European and Atlantic community. The expansion of people-to-people relationships will help to establish a firm foundation for the future.

The key to the future is for Slovakia to continue on the path of a government committed to political stability and economic growth. The Slovak people were on the wrong side of the struggle in the two World Wars of the last century. This is all part of history. A new beginning occurred ten years ago, on January 1, 1993. It was soon clouded by the arrival on the scene of Prime Minister Vladamir Merčiar. The Merčiar government was too nationalistic and exhibited many deficiencies for a democracy. However, the very encouraging development is that the people of Slovakia through the democratic process brought about a change in 1998 when Mikules Dzurinda formed the new government. The Dzurinda ascendancy combined with the election of centrist reform-minded Rudolph Schuster in 1999 give good grounds for optimism for maintaining a pro-active role in the Atlantic-European community.

I spent many hours during my week in Slovakia talking with people of all classes, and I sensed enthusiasm for the new democratic state. Slovakia, in my opinion, is on this road.