

FEATURES OF INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN INTERWAR CZECHOSLOVAK- HUNGARIAN RELATIONS AND THE CURRENT STATE OF SLOVAK-HUNGARIAN DIALOGUE

ALIAKSANDR PIAHANAU

Abstract: This text deals with the history of Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations in 1918-1939 and shows its interlink with present tensions between Bratislava and Budapest. It argues that “conflicting historical memories” could affect stability in Central Europe.

Keywords: Trianon, Revisionism, National Minority, Frontier Dispute.

АСАБЛІВАСЦІ СУВЯЗІ СТАСУНКАЎ ЧЭХАСЛАВАКІІ І ВЕНГРЫ І МІЖВАЕННЫ ЧАС З СУЧАСНЫМ СТАНАМ СЛАВАЦКА-ВЕНГЕРСКАГА ДЫЯЛОГУ

Анотацыя: Гэты тэкст разглядае гісторыю чэхаславацка-вугорскіх адносін у 1918–1939 гг. і дэманструе яе сувязь з існуючай сёння напружанасцю паміж афіцыйнымі Браціславай і Будапештам. Тут сцвярджаецца, што “супрацьлеглыя гістарычныя ўспаміны” могуць пагражаць стабільнасці ў Сярэдняй Еўропе.

Ключавыя словы: Трыянон, рэвізіянізм, нацыянальныя меншасці, памежныя канфлікты.

Despite post-Cold War geopolitical realities in Central Europe (first of all, the European Union and NATO enlargements), contemporary regional interstate relations remain largely shaped by the political heritage from the first half of the XXth c., and more particularly by the problematic political-territorial divisions that emerged after World War I. The questions of state legitimacy, borders and asymmetric rights of minorities have been persisting. The most famous and tragic experience of this fragility appeared on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Another of such “hereditary” antagonisms is presented by the relations between Hungary and its northern and eastern neighbors – Slovakia and Romania. Nowadays, these tensions do not appear to be dangerously escalated, as it was during the Interwar era. Nevertheless, it seems important to understand how the Central European sub-system of international relations works, which issues could cause its destabilization and what could be done to prevent it. This text gives a short overview of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations in 1918-1939. Also, it localizes interpretations of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations in current public discourses.

Typically, the Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations in 1918-1939 are described through the simple division between winners and losers of WWI. During those 20 years, the dialogue between Prague and Budapest focused on the issues of new frontier lines, positions of national minorities, and other obligations regulated by Peace Treaties (for example, restrictions in armament). According to these issues, three stages of Prague-Budapest relations can be observed during the Interwar period: their establishment (1918-20), maintaining (1920-38) and modification (1938-39). Also, in spite of permanent bilateral contacts, the basic framework of Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations was orchestrated from outside. Great Powers gathered in the Paris (1919-1920), Munich (1938) or Vienna (1938) Conferences regulated the Czechoslovak-Hungarian tensions according to its own interests.

Principally, Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations were shaped by the attachment of 61 000 sq. km of Hungarian lands with 3,5 million inhabitants to Czechoslovakia in 1918-1919. Internationally legalized by the Trianon Treaty in 1920, this decision was presented as a result of the (Czecho-) Slovak rights to self-determination. Despite the fact that the new frontiers were difficultly accepted by Budapest, the Trianon Treaty also fixed some diplomatic achievements for Hungary: the Entente recognized Hungarian independence, Hungary kept some territories contested by its neighbours (for example, in 1918-1919, Czechoslovakia demanded Western Hungary for its “corridor” towards Yugoslavia) and some rights were guaranteed for Magyar minorities on the ceded territories.

Not surprisingly, the main Hungarian interwar diplomatic efforts were aimed at regaining the lost territories, first of all Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Slovakia. Moreover, there the Magyars formed the second largest ethnic group (close to one million persons) after the Slovaks. This co-habitation between the Czechoslovak state and the Hungarian minority frequently had a conflictive nature (resulting in expulsions of Hungarians and accusations of “disloyalty to the political regime”). The deprivation of Hungarians from their basic rights also contributed to tensions between Prague and Budapest. Simultaneously, Czechoslovakia used diplomacy and economic or military deterrence to affect Hungarian policy.

As a result, all bilateral attempts to normalize relations in 1921, 1923 and 1936-38 eventually failed and a state of permanent animosity between the two states prevailed. Consequently, Czechoslovakia and Hungary pursued polar foreign policies. Prague looked for support from Paris and London (as well as from Belgrade and Bucharest) while Budapest was mainly interested in developing its links with Roma or Berlin. Between 1938 and 1939, when Czechoslovakia was shaken by a heavy political crisis, Hungary got 12 400 sq.km. (with Magyar majority) from Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. However, after the Second World War, the Trianon borders between the CSR and Hungary (except the Subcarpathian site, due to its annexation by the USSR) were reestablished.

It seems that R. Brubaker’s approach of “triadic nexus” could bring a new insight on some features of Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations. Brubaker explains nationalism questions in post-Soviet Europe through a particular relational configuration between nationalizing state, external national homeland and national minority. Czechoslovakia could here be considered as the nationalizing state, Hungary as the external national homeland and Magyars in CSR as the national minority. Additionally, actors such as the League of Nations, Great powers (France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the USSR) or local powers (Romania, Yugoslavia, Poland) had a strong influence on Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations in 1918-1939. Thus, to analyse interwar dialogue between Prague and Budapest, the required model of their relation should include not only two (Czechoslovakia and Hungary), but four actors (minorities and the international community).

After the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the pattern of Slovak-Hungarian relations does not seem different from its preceding state. Nowadays, the role of fourth actor is mainly represented by the European Union, which tries to reduce majority-minority ethnic tensions inside Slovakia and to calm nationalistic voices in Bratislava and Budapest. Still, the issues of Hungarian minority in Slovakia and a fear of frontier revision remain the most conflictive subjects. Few times Slovak-Hungarian quarrels

even slowed down work of the Visegrad Four group. Moreover, it appears that any attempt to normalize contemporary Slovak-Hungarian relations generally starts with arguments about their common past.

The Mečiar and Fico's governments (respectively 1993-1998 and 2006-2010) in Slovakia and the Orban's governments (1998-2002, 2010-nowadays) in Hungary have used a lot this "nationalistic rhetoric". For example, demands for the Hungarian autonomy in Slovakia by local Magyar parties or the adoption of laws (in 2001 and 2010) targeting the Magyar minorities living abroad by the Budapest parliament brought widespread criticism from the Bratislava, as a step to a new border revision. On the other hand, the recognition of the Beneš decrees' validity (which includes reprisals against the Hungarian population in the post-WWII years) by the Bratislava parliament in 2007 is another example showing that the "surrounding war" history of the Slovak-Hungarian disputed neighbourhood remains actual. Also, there is no accident that the question of the recognition of the Kosovo independence after 2008 for both states was marked by their long-term approaches to the frontier question in Central Europe.

Despite of similarities between Interwar and Post-Cold war models of (Czecho-)Slovak-Hungarian relations, nowadays their relations develop according to another, more mutually interconnected logic. Both countries have established closer economic and political cooperation (mainly inside NATO and EU frames since 1999 and 2004) and opened the frontiers to each other (since 2007).

Also, there are signs of decline of influence of "ethnic" parties. For example, the Slovak National Party and the Party of Hungarian Coalition are not anymore part of the Parliament in Bratislava, unlike the newly emerged "Bridge" (Most-Híd) party, which calls for Slovak-Hungarian cooperation. On the other side, nationalistic parties have recently increased their influence in Hungary – in the 2010 election the right-wing Fidesz and Jobbik took 3,3 and 1 million of votes against 2,2 and 0,1 millions in the 2006 election.

In spite of government changes from the left to the right during the last two decades, Slovak-Hungarian relations remain under the strong impact of "antagonistic historical memory", each side often pretends to see itself as a (former, current of future) "victim" from the other. In a whole, it has created a special model of relations, where the problems of state neighbourhood, borders, rights of national minorities and contradictory historical perspectives are bound together.

To conclude, the subject of (Czecho-)Slovak-Hungarian relations is still a very disputable part of the regional history and faces the challenge of radically different historical interpretations. The drawing of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian borders in 1918-1920, its revision in 1938-1939, but also the

forced “Slovakisation” and deportations of Hungarians by Czechoslovakia in 1945-1948 are considered as the most disputed subjects for Slovak and Hungarian common history. Disagreements about the past often contribute to worsening of relations between both Danubian countries. Thus, a more comprehensive, with bilateral recognition of conducted violations, but also less nation-concentrated, historical narratives are needed.