

A NEW STATE IN CENTRAL EUROPE – THE CHANGING POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Nový štát v strednej Európe – meniac sa politická geografia v Slovenskej republike

Politická geografia sa mohla začať slobodne rozvíjať na Slovensku až po roku 1989. Potom si však okamžite našla pomerne široké spektrum zaujímavých tém, kombinujúcich najmä štúdium dôsledkov vývoja po období studenej vojny, postkomunistickej transformácie a integračných procesov. V tejto kapitole sumarizujeme vývoj vo vybraných oblastiach politickej geografie, ktoré najviac zaujali slovenských politických geografov za posledných 20 rokov. Zdá sa pritom, že špecifická situácia Slovenska ako malej, postkomunistickej, vnútrozemskej krajiny nie je problémom pre v súčasnosti už medzinárodne dobre integrovaný štát. Keďže na dejinách v našom regióne záleží, nemohli sme sa vyhnúť historickému politicko-geografickému diskurzu, zameranému na otázky formovania štátu, jeho územia a hraníc. Pravdepodobne najviditeľnejším výsledkom súvisiacim s vývojom po r. 1989 je geopolitický posun z „Východu“ späť na „Západ“ (hoci inak chápaný ako kedysi), potvrdený konečne aj formálnym vstupom do EÚ a NATO. Slovenská politická geografia nezanedbáva ani volebnú geografiu, ako jednu z jej najtypickejších častí. Meniace sa volebné preferencie občanov tranzitívnej spoločnosti v čase a priestore sú jednou z kľúčových výziev na štúdium a interpretáciu. Značná pozornosť sa venuje vývoju na úrovni miestnej a regionálnej samosprávy. Práve tu nachádzame obrovskú zmenu a energiu vynaloženú v úsilí o ich presadenie a následne efektívnejšie fungovanie prostredníctvom reforiem zameraných na decentralizáciu a modernizáciu. Najmä miestna úroveň sa stala stabilným prvkom demokracie, hoci sa musí vyrovnávať s ťažkosťami ako sú veľký počet malých obcí, či zvládnutím samosprávy v multietnických obciach alebo veľkých mestách. Jedným z najmladších prvkov v politickej organizácii štátu je regionálna samospráva, ktorá však bude potrebovať dlhšie obdobie, kým dosiahne pozíciu vplyvnejšej a verejnosťou viac rešpektovanej úrovne verejnej správy.

Kľúčové slová: štát, hranice, územie, voľby, politické strany, miestna samospráva, regionálna samospráva, Slovenská republika

INTRODUCTION

The Slovak Republic is one of results of substantial changes that happened in Central Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The origin of the new state in this case was peacefully negotiated by the Czech and Slovak political elites within the framework of the predecessor state – Czechoslovakia. In reality, two “velvet”

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events, the “velvet revolution” in 1989 and “velvet divorce” in 1993 are behind the existence of the new independent state and have generated a strong historical commitment to the future of Slovak society. The last two decades have been characterized by a hectic period of changes, affecting of all spheres of the functioning. The serious long term social and economic transformation, which started in 1989, was after a few years combined with the complicated process of establishing and building the structures of a new independent state. Later it was followed by the accession processes to EU and NATO. The outcome is clear — Slovakia has changed during that period from a part of the Czechoslovak federation with a centrally planned economy and totalitarian political system with one ruling party, to an independent democratic state with market oriented economy and a member state of the EU and NATO.

Political geography almost did not exist during communist regime, so it can be considered as a younger part of Slovak geography. It could freely develop only after 1989 and it has immediately found exceptionally interesting topics for study. The deep changes in Slovak’s geopolitical position, new democratic political environment, reformed mode of governance attracted more geographers. In this paper, the group of scholars joined together to summarise development in selected political geographical issues in Slovakia. It also reflects the most typical research topics that attract Slovak political geographers after 1989. We started by considerations concerning specific position of Slovakia as small, post-socialist state in current world. It provides traditional basic thoughts on limits of new state functioning. Because history matters in this region, we could not avoid historical political geographical discourse. It focuses on formation of the state territory, its borders and related conflicts. Probably the most visible outcome related to development after 1989 is geopolitical shift from “East” back to the “West” extensively debated e.g. by Blažík (1999 and 2002), Buček (1994 and 1996), Michaeli and Ištók (2002), confirmed finally by joining EU and NATO. Nevertheless, its position in Central Europe, at the current eastern edge of the EU and NATO, gives Slovakia a certain specific location. The next section explains issues below the central state level. It is a crucial area for understanding the substantial shift toward a democratic society and its more efficient governance. We pay attention to the political system, main political parties and electoral geography. Almost permanent public administration reforms and related territorial adjustments have also been a fruitful field of investigation for political geography in Slovakia. We could not avoid emphasizing development in the field of local government, including such specific issues as inter-municipal cooperation, self-government in ethnically mixed territories or governing large cities. The final section presents regional self-government as the latest level of government introduced in Slovakia. Although this chapter provides only a basic introduction into the above mentioned issues, it can be considered as an efficient guide to Slovak political geography, including rich references at the end of this chapter.

SLOVAKIA AS A SMALL, POST-SOCIALIST, LAND-LOCKED STATE

Regarding the area (49 034 km²) Slovakia is ranked as the 126th out of all the states of the world and regarding the population it is ranked as the 110th. These data might imply that Slovakia ranks among small-sized states. This status of Slovakia is supported by political and geographical classifications, since in all of them it is ranked as a small-sized state.

The criterion of size, however, appears to be vague and imprecise since it may be relatively subjective, in other words it may depend on who is responsible for the categorization. Thus, in the given context it is important to take into consideration how a state is viewed by its citizens (both laymen and experts) as well as its political representatives or foreign observers. A state is regarded as small if it is regarded as such by both its citizens and foreigners (Drulák 1997).

Whereas the former Czechoslovakia was regarded as a medium-sized state, with both of its successors this is not the case. Not only Slovak geographers but also political scientists rank Slovakia as a small state, for example Ivanička (1999) holds that with regard to population and area Slovakia is a small state. Similarly, Šmihula (2000) claims that “regarding the geographic and demographic parameters Slovakia ranks among the small Central European states”. These assessments result from essential geographical information – the area and population.

Recently the number of small-sized states has increased and, what is more, these states are flourishing. After the cold war a number of independent states came into existence whose population and area classify them as small-sized states, however, the open system of the world economy enhances the independent existence of small states (Drulák 1998). These facts are optimistic also for Slovakia.

The size of a state, however, does not depend solely on the population and area and, therefore, other factors need to be taken into account. Thus, a number of authors have dealt with the hierarchical typology, for example the criteria for designing a typology in political geography have been outlined by Ištók (2004).

In order to determine the size of a state it is important to assess the scope of its power in the sense of capability to influence the behaviour of its neighbours in accordance with its intentions or interests in various regions. This capability may, however, be limited. In this sense, the attribute “small” is actually equivalent to “not being very powerful” (Drulák 1997). The above-mentioned capabilities depend on a number of factors and the essential geographical data (area and population) are significant but not always decisive in the given context. When analysing Slovakia’s status (in terms of the scope of power) and relation to the immediate neighbours or other Central European countries, it is possible to conclude that in this space Slovakia appears to be “the least powerful” state. What is more, for almost all the neighbouring countries Slovakia appears to be “the least powerful” neighbour (except Austria and Hungary, for which it is Slovenia that is regarded as “the least powerful” neighbour).

Status seems to be a significant factor influencing the activities of a state; however, other factors (such as the level of economic development, geographical position, type and stability of the political system or institutional structure) are of considerable importance as well. Therefore, as a rule, the fact that some states that are similar in their area and population does not necessarily mean that they are similar in other characteristics as well. If a comparison is made within the group of the states with comparable population and area (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Croatia, Jordan, Kirgizstan, Nicaragua, Papua New Guinea and Turkmenistan), it is possible to conclude that the group in question is heterogeneous comprising states of various categories of “bigness”. Within this group, after considering a number of criteria, Slovakia may be categorized as one of the biggest states.

In summary, with regard to the issue of “bigness” or “smallness” of Slovakia, it is necessary to stress that in addition to the above-mentioned factors an important role is played by the international prestige resulting from successful domestic and foreign policy, economic development, achievements of science and research, participation in integration processes and in international humanitarian activities or peace forces. With regard to all these factors the status of Slovakia has improved since the late 1990s.

One of Slovakia’s characteristics is the fact that it is a landlocked country. This, however, in relatively small Europe, unlike in large continents, does not appear to be a disadvantage. Slovakia’s geographical position is compensated for by the access to the Danubian route. Klein (2000) refers to this situation as follows: “even though the Danube touches Slovakia’s border only in the South-west, this European communication corridor has affected Slovakia’s geopolitical space in a decisive manner”. The Danube supports the economy, transportation and links Slovakia with those countries of South-east Europe with which Slovakia lacks a direct contact. Last but not least, the Danube enables the access to the Black Sea and by means of the Rhine – Main – Danube Canal also enables access to the North Sea.

Another potential advantage for Slovakia is the development of transit transport supported by intensive business contacts amongst the countries of the integrating continent. The traditional weakness of a landlocked country, having land boundaries that are barriers obstructing the access to the sea, has thus been removed owing to the creation and expansion of the Schengen system joined by Slovakia at the end of 2007.

Since the splitting of Czecho-Slovakia into two independent states the Slovak republic has followed a complicated path marked by her ambition to become a part of Western civilization including all the political and economic consequences. Achieving this goal has been affected by a number of circumstances. First of all, gaining independence in 1993 was a new experience for Slovakia. Unlike the neighbours until that date Slovakia used to be a weak part of larger political structures. The advantage of gaining independence was the fact that it was acknowledged by all the world powers as well as by the majority of other states.

The period following the year 1993 can be characterized as a period of searching for its own way of transformation strategy affected by a number of difficulties resulting from internal political changes. In addition, Slovakia’s political and economic development has also been affected by the lack of experience in solving new problems related to the transformation of the political and economic system. In spite of this fact, during the past decades the political elite have succeeded in partly modernizing and mainly opening up the economy, thus following the example of advanced Western democracies.

The Slovak Republic referred to as a post-communist country has gradually become a fully accepted country of the international community. The assumption that within international interaction Slovakia can take far more advantage of its geographical position, human, economic and natural resources than in the ineffective unitary Czechoslovak Federation (Zatlakaj 1992) has proved to be right. Nevertheless, as Halás (2005) holds, even today Slovakia faces “a challenge of finalizing, stabilizing and transforming the political, economic and social systems“. Slovakia’s present development supports the viewpoint expressed by Verešš (2005). He regards establishing Slovakia as a climax in the political and geographical develop-

ment and an ideal framework for completing the ethnic and national development of the Slovaks.

FORMATION OF SLOVAKIA AND ITS BOUNDARIES

Slovakia as a state is one of the youngest among the states in Europe. From the 10th century until 1918 Slovakia was an integral part of Hungary (Fig. 1). As an administrative territory, it was demarcated on the map of Europe only after the end of the First World War and after the disintegration of the historic Kingdom of Hungary. Nevertheless the ethno genesis of the Slovak nation in the region of Western Carpathians can be observed since the migration of nations, since the time of settlement of this territory by Slavs. The research of the own history was of special importance for the Slovak already from the 18th century (Matej Bel), and in particular from the 19th century. In respect to the existing political and national conditions on the Slovak territory, the fundamental ideological task of research was to prove the independence and autonomy of the Slovaks as a nation. The research on the formation of the nation and its territory was almost exclusively historiographical and not historico-geographical. Until 1918 the concept of the territory of Slovakia was formulated mostly very vaguely, usually as part of more complex political programs of self-government within the former Hungary, or Austria-Hungary (Klimko 1980).

The events close to the end of the First World War and the origin of Czechoslovakia fundamentally changed the circumstances in Slovakia. Czechoslovakia was already before its official creation considered, due to its foreign resistance, as allied to the victorious states. Hungary, in contrast to Austria-Hungary, tried to preserve its integrity even at the end of 1918. However, as the loser state, it had to accept, although unwillingly, the dictat of Great Powers. In this context, demarcation lines were set (Fig. 2), and this allowed the Czechoslovak army to occupy the territory of Slovakia. Attempts of the Hungarian governments to reverse the situation (Romsics 2006) were not successful and the established demarcation line became the basis for peace negotiations, which culminated in signing a peace treaty at Trianon in 1920. Paradoxically, this key moment, still does not receive the attention it deserves where the historical geography of Slovakia concerned, aspects from a narrow group of aspects (Deák 1996, Hronský 1998, Klimko 1980), is at present not dedicated a relevant respect concerning the historical geography of Slovakia. Due to the contemporary political circumstances, the boundaries established at Trianon were more convenient for the Slovaks; regarding the number of minorities. For this reason, particularly during the first half of the 20th century main research attention, even historical-geographical was directed, destined to supporting the idea of a Slovak Slovakia. The aspects of Slovakian-Hungarian ethnic boundaries development were discussed in detail from the Middle Ages until the 20th century (Houdek 1931, Varsik 1940).

The second main issue was political geographical, or geopolitical research of the territory of Czechoslovakia (Korčák 1938), or of Slovakia (Bokes 1944), which was conducted in the sense of classical German political geography. One of the most significant moments in Slovakia's territorial formation was the events of the years 1938 and 1939. The signing of the Munich Agreement, was followed by the quick collapse of Czechoslovakia as known during the period between two world wars. Slovakia reached on the one hand the desired autonomy, but with noticeable features of a totalitarian system. On the other hand, significant disadvantageous modi-

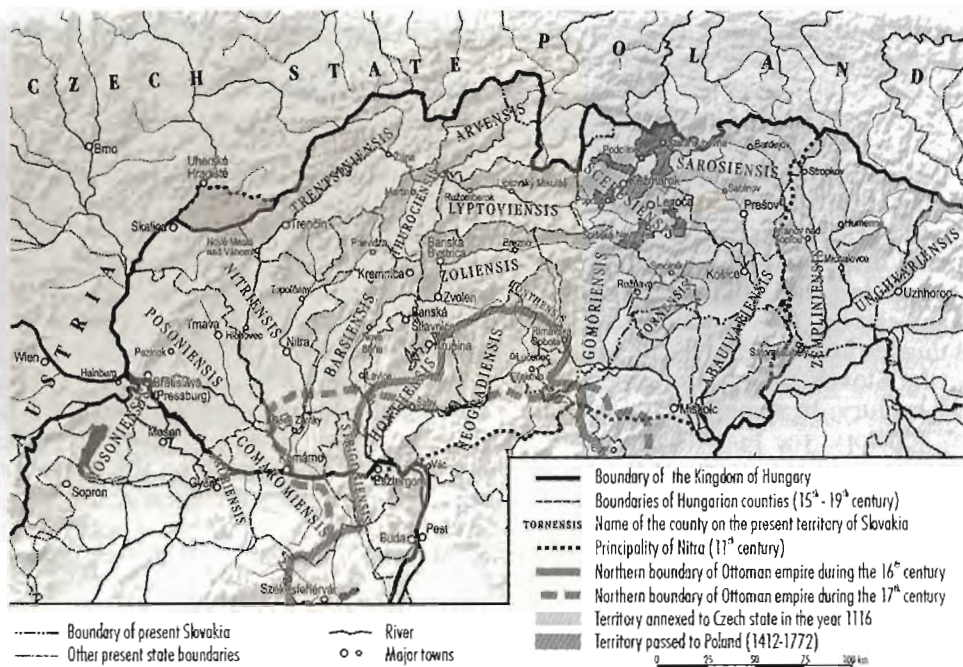


Fig. 1. Slovakia within Hungary

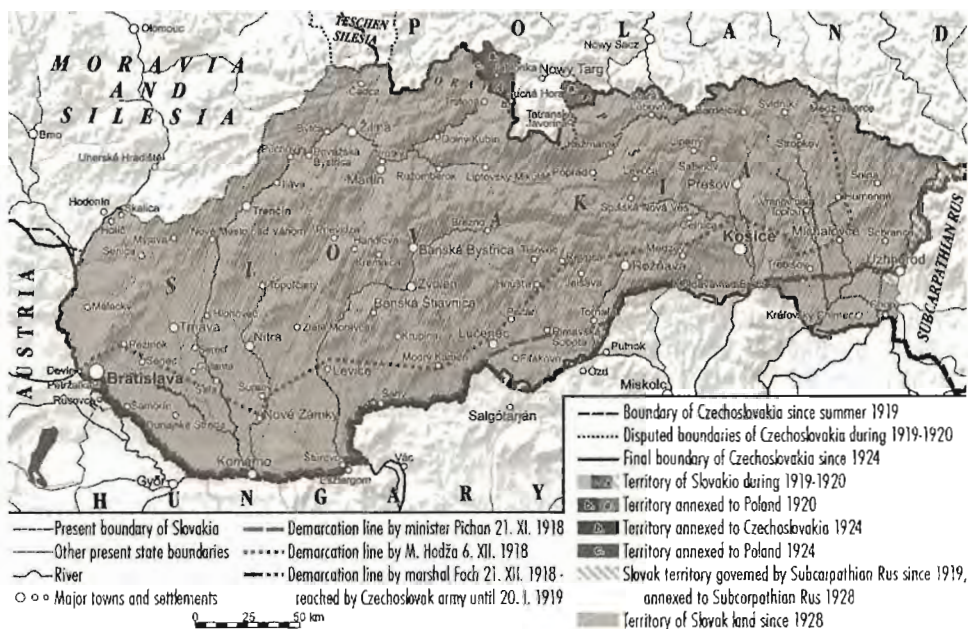


Fig. 2. Slovakia 1918-1925

fications were made to the Slovak border. Based on the decision of the 1st Vienna Arbitration, Hungary obtained 21.5% of its original territory and 25.6% of the population. At the same time Poland occupied smaller border areas (0.4% of the territory, 0.3% of the population) to the north of Slovakia (see Fig. 3). The hectic developments of this period culminated in the year 1939 with the declaration of the independence of Slovakia under the protection of Germany and other border changes on March 14th 1939. Hungary took advantage of alleged inconsistencies in the definition of the eastern border (it was not the part of the 1st Vienna Arbitration), and militarily occupied (during so-called "Little War") another 3.5% of the original Slovak territory with 2% of the population (Lacko in Kršák 2009). Subsequently southern border was also slightly modified. The last updating of the border in this period was the recovery of territories occupied by Poland. Slovakia also obtained the former Hungarian territories occupied by Poland in 1920.

The period of problematic independence of Slovakia during the World War II had a major impact on the historic-geographical research concerning the Slovak territorial formation. This influence is remarkable also at present and still polarizes politically and ideologically the society, together with the historical- and partly historical-geographical research. From 1939 a group of the intelligentsia associated with the former regime understood the contemporary events as the culmination of the development of the state and nation. After the end of World War II, this ideological group had to emigrate, but after the collapse of the communist regime it again won a significant position in society, especially after the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic in 1993 (Vnuk 1994). The second ideological group was involved during World War II in the anti-fascist resistance and consequently also against the official regime. This movement culminated in the restitution of Czechoslovakia in 1945. The perception of World War II in Slovakia by this group followed the official allied positions, which, from the viewpoint of international law, rejected any changes in the years 1938-1944, and saw them as a sign of expansion of Nazi Germany in Central Europe. In this context, both ideological groups have different perceptions of the continuity of Slovak statehood. Whereas the first group is openly committed to the idea of continuity (1st and 2nd Slovak Republic; Verešš 2005), the second rejects such a continuity, especially with reference to the totalitarian nature of the regime in Slovakia in the years 1939-1945 (using the term "Slovak State"; Kamenec 1992, Smith 1998). Discussions between both groups were discouraged by the beginning of communist totalitarianism, which more or less suppressed most of the historical and geographical research concerning the themes of Slovak territorial formation: partly also the question of the liberation of Slovakia in 1918-1919 (origin of "capitalist" Czechoslovakia and the fight against the Bolshevik regime in Hungary) and in particular the question of frontier changes (the ceding of Subcarpathian Rus to Soviet Union in 1945 and subsequent modifications of the eastern border of the Slovakia, questions connected to the historical and current borders with Poland in Orava and Spiš regions). Attention was given mainly to the oldest ethno genesis of Slovak nation (Ratkoš 1972), formation of the Slovak territory as a whole (Klimko 1980, Lukniš 1988), and to research on the development of its administrative divisions (Žudel 1984).

The collapse of the totalitarian system and the subsequent origin of the Slovak Republic had an essential impact on the development of historical geographical research concerning the formation of the Slovak territory. However, it should be noted that the focus on the formation of the Slovak border as a whole represents

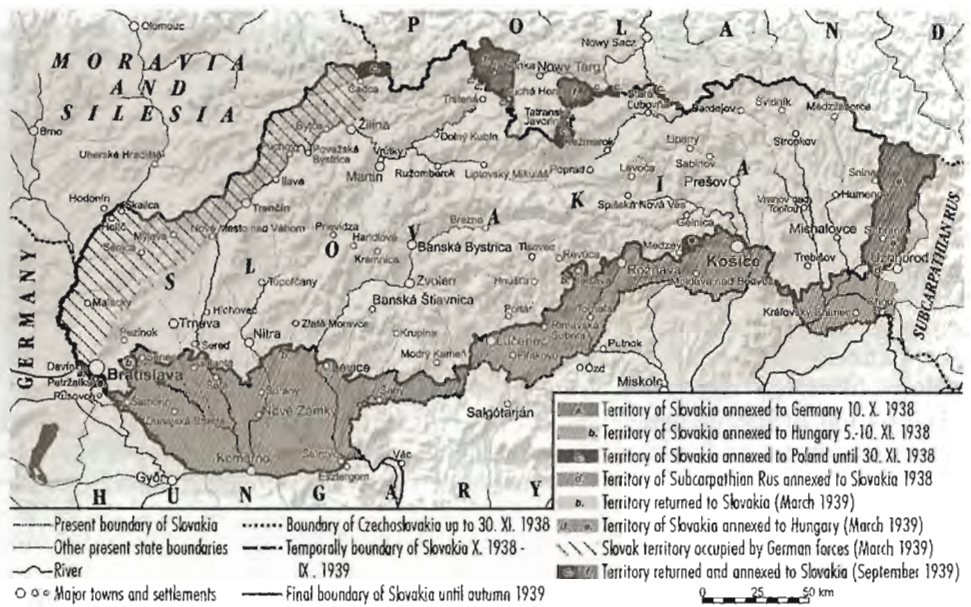


Fig. 3. Slovakia 1938-1939

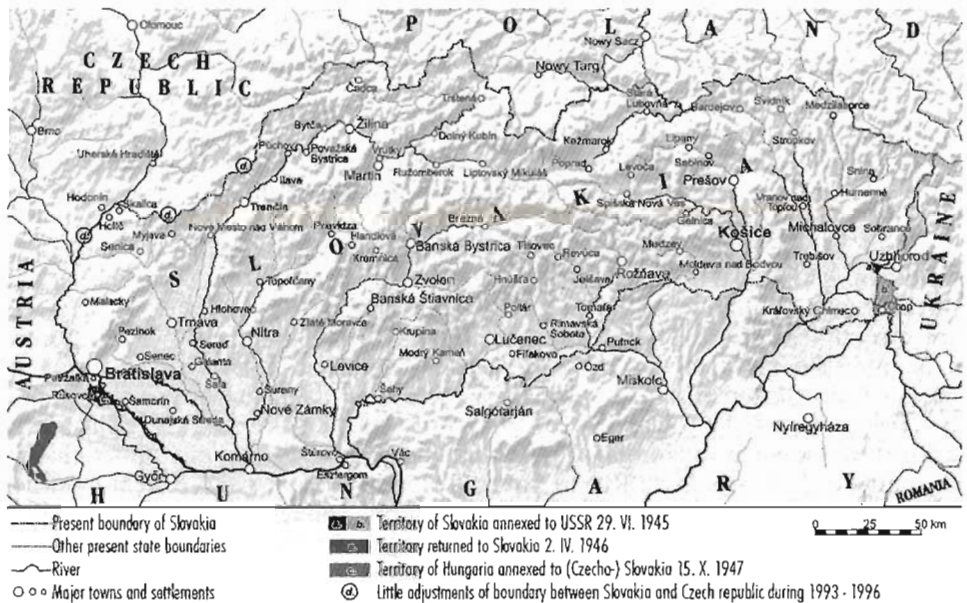


Fig. 4. Slovakia since 1945

a rather marginal position (Deák 1992), more dominant is the research on the Slovak territory, for example on its administrative division (Atlas krajiny Slovenskej republiky 2002, Gurnák 2002). There are some major issues in the recent research on the development of the Slovak territory. There is the issue of the Slovak territorial formation in the early Middle Ages (Nitra principality), and its inclusion into the medieval Hungary (Avenarius 1992, Čaplovič 1998, Steinhübel 2004). This topic raises controversies in the domestic, as well as in the international professional scene especially with respect to limited historical materials and their different interpretations. The second issue is the question of the Slovak-Hungarian border during the 20th century, often as part of broader analysis of Slovak-Hungarian relations, ethnic borders etc. (Deák 1996, Hronský 1998). Some revival occurred in the research reflecting the border changes with Poland in the Orava and Spiš regions (Ištók and Lovacká 2006). The problems linked to the formation of the eastern border of Slovakia, as well as the western border are still on the edge of scientific interest (Duleba 2000). In addition to the state border analysis, there emerged studies oriented to the position of the Slovak territory formation within the wider Central European context. The biggest weakness of historical and geographical research in this field in Slovakia has been the more or less only general co-operation and interdisciplinary connection between the historical and geographical approaches. A significant joint success in this area was the first edition of the historical atlas of Slovakia (Kršák ed. 2009), for the first time focusing only on the present territory of Slovakia. With its more professional and cognitive character, it represents a major synthesis and presentation of historical and geographical research in Slovakia.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SLOVAK POLITICAL SYSTEM AND ELECTORAL GEOGRAPHY

The establishment of parliamentary democracy with a plurality of political parties was among the most important turns after 1989. The transformation of the society had to be accompanied and supported by rapid and overall development of the political system. It has developed during the transition period on four levels – local, regional, state and European.

The local level can be considered as the basic level, functioning on principles of self-government since 1990 in about 2,900 municipalities. Five elections have been held on local level in regular four years period (1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006). The regional level of self-government did not exist for a longer period. After heavy disputes on various issues (especially territorial division at this level) the first elections to regional councils were held in 2001 and the second in 2005. The third election should be held at in the end of 2009.

The state level, represented by the Parliament and President of the Republic is according to the Constitution the most important and decisive part of the Slovak political system. This level went through major changes in electoral rules and its stability was the weakest.

It was divided into federal and national level in the first two Parliamentary elections in 1990 and 1992. The Slovak political system was an integral part of the political system of the Czechoslovak federation. Parliamentary elections were held to Slovak National Council with 150 deputies and to the two houses of the Federal Assembly (House of People and House of Nations). Together with the process of ongoing disintegration of federation, the importance of the Slovak National Council

rose between the two elections while that of the Federal Assembly diminished. Slovakia was divided to four electoral regions (West, Central, East Slovak region and Bratislava). The Political parties had to produce different lists of their candidates in each electoral region. The main change in rules between the elections in 1990 and 1992 to the Slovak National Council was the raising of the limit for entrance of single political party to parliament from 3% to 5% of valid votes.

From January 1993, when the independent Slovak Republic started its official history, the National Council of the Slovak Republic remained as, the only directly elected parliamentary body at the state level. The Federal Assembly dissolved itself together with the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic on 31 December 1992.

The first parliamentary elections in Slovakia as an independent state in autumn 1994 were premature, after a serious political crisis. They brought to power a nationalist and populist government of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. This government tried to concentrate power in its hands during its four year period and a few times broke the Constitution and performed some steps which were against the principles of democracy. By the end of its period the ruling coalition had changed the electoral law for parliamentary elections which were held at the regular time in 1998. The four electoral regions were cancelled and the territory of Slovakia became one electoral unit. Each political party could present only one list of their candidates with a maximum of 150 names. The limit for entrance of a coalition of two or three parties to parliament was raised up from 7% to 10% of valid votes and the coalition of four and more parties to at least 15% of all valid votes. The limit of 5% for one party remained unchanged. This rule led to the creation of electoral parties, where political parties were united, instead creating coalitions. The New parliament, after election in 1998, changed back the second rule, but did not renew the electoral regions and Slovakia has remained one electoral unit. There was no other significant change in the election rules for parliamentary elections and they were held in 2002 and 2006 according to them.

The permanent struggle between Prime Minister and President in the period of years 1994-1998 led the new government to change the system of presidential election to a two round direct election. The first direct election of the Slovak president was held in 1999 and an other two (2004 and 2009) followed in regular five years period.

The European level is represented by the European parliament (EP) because Slovakia has become a member of the European Union since May 2004. The election to the European Parliament was first held in the same year in June. Slovakia had 14 mandates in the EP. The next election to EP was held in June 2009, but the number of deputies representing the Slovak Republic was reduced to 13.

The Slovak political scene

The deep and relatively rapid processes of transformation of the whole society have their reflection in the development and constant transformation of the Slovak political scene. The result of these processes was the instability of political subjects. During the period of 20 years we could not find a relevant political subject, which a in all six parliamentary elections and entered Parliament. There were ongoing processes of integration and disintegration of political parties and movements, with politicians shifting between parties.

The plural political scene was renewed after the velvet revolution and new political parties and movements were established. Some of them rose up from various legal and illegal religious, ecological and civic movements and groups, which had already been active during the last decade of the communist regime. Among those new subjects the strongest were Public Against Violence (VPN), the winner of elections in 1990, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Green Party (SZ). The traditional parties that remained active or were included the Communist Party (KSS), the winner of elections in 1946, Democratic Party (DS) Social Democratic Party (SDSS) and Slovak National Party (SNS). The Hungarian minority was represented at the beginning by three parties – Coexistence (EGY), Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (MKDH) and Hungarian Civic Party (MOS). They ran together in all parliamentary elections, with the exception of the first elections in 1990, where the Hungarian Civic Party was in coalition with Public Against Violence. They have created, forced by the new electoral law in 1998, a new political subject Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK).

The largest transformations have occurred on the left side of the political scene. The former ruling Communist Party (KSS) entered the Parliament in democratic elections 1990. It was transformed into the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) and ran in elections and entered parliament in 1992 and 1998. In 1994 elections, it had created a not very successful coalition Common Choice (SV) together with Slovak Social Democratic Party (SDSS), Slovak Green Party (SZS) and Movement of Slovak Farmers (HP). The new political party Smer, which was formed in 1999 as centrist party, has transformed after the 2002 elections into Smer – Social Democracy and integrated under its umbrella the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), Slovak Social Democratic Party (SDSS) and some other small left wing parties. The extremist newly emerged Communist Party (KSS), which ran in elections from 1994 and entered the Parliament in 2002 remained independent. For one period 1994-1998, the radical left wing Slovak Workers Association (ZRS) was in parliament.

Because of the specific conditions of the 1998 parliamentary elections, two parties from the left side of the political spectrum, the Slovak Social Democratic Party (SDSS), and Slovak Green Party (SZS) ran within the artificially made electoral party Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) together with three right wing or centrist groups: the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), Slovak Democratic Union (DU) and Democratic Party (DS). The last two of them created a new political group the Slovak Christian and Democratic Union (SDKU-DS), which ran in the elections of 2002 and 2006 and entered Parliament as the strongest right wing party. The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) participated as an independent group in all parliamentary elections with the exception of 1998. The leading party on the political scene for a period of ten years was the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), which originated from a split in the broad movement Public Against Violence (VPN). This party has run in all elections since 1992, entered the Parliament in all of them and was the strongest in 1992, 1994, 1998 and 2002. The Slovak National Party (SNS) has participated in all democratic elections since 1990, but in 2002 it did not reach the quorum to enter Parliament, because at time it was divided and the Right Slovak National Party (PSNS) took its votes. Three liberal political parties have occurred and were able to enter parliament as independent groups each for one period: Slovak Democratic Union – DU (1994-1998), Party of Civic Understanding SOP (1998-2002), Alliance of the New Citizen ANO (2002-2006). Nevertheless, many small political parties (about 90) are registered in Slovakia, the ma-

jority of them with no chance to enter parliament. It should be noticed that 17-19 political groups ran each parliamentary elections.

Slovak electoral geography

Slovak electoral geography started its development in the 1990s by analysis of the results of the first parliamentary election held in 1990. Its main focus during the whole period has concentrated on evaluation of different spatial aspects of support for political parties in parliamentary elections. The pioneer study was written by Mariot (1991), who could be considered the founder of modern Slovak electoral geography. In this study the results of the first parliamentary election hold after 1989 were evaluate on the level of municipalitie . The territorial aspects of electoral support for specific parties in parliamentary elections were the subject of numerous studies by this author (Mariot 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2001, 2003a, 2003b and 2004). Comprehensive analysis of the 1992 parliamentary election was provided by Brunn and Vlčková (1994). Baráthet al. (1995) and Szöllös (2000 and 2006) studied the regional stability of electoral support for the parties. The connection of electoral preferences with the location of administrative units and with regions of maximum unemployment was studied by Podhorský (2001). Electoral geography is also an important part of the research of the sociologist Krivý (1999a and 1999b). Very valuable and comprehensive book evaluating the historical, sociological and cultural aspects of electoral behaviour in the regions of Slovakia was written by Krivý et al. (1996). The geographical aspects of the parliamentary elections in 1990, 1992 and 1994 are evaluated in a monograph by Vlčková (1995). The presidential, municipal, regional or European elections are on the margin of interest. Only the study of Mariot (2000b) was dedicated to analysis of the first direct presidential elections in 1999. A theoretical study evaluating the model of the Slovak political scene was written by Mariot (2001). All the above mentioned studies included the whole territory of Slovakia. The only study related to support for political parties in municipalities of a specific region was published by Madleňák (2006). It is important for further development of Slovak electoral geography to widen its subject from parliamentary to other types of elections (local, regional, presidential, European), extend the application of more diverse methods and attitudes in analysis of spatial aspects of elections, as well as to attract more geographers into this field.

Regions of electoral support for parties in parliamentary elections

We can observe some stability of support and voter preferences in the regions of Slovakia caused by various factors. The main factors influencing preferences in elections seem to be economic and social conditions, level of education, nationality, religion. Differences in political orientations between rural and urban territories are also important. A long term decrease of electoral participation concerns all levels of political organization and many emerge as an important problem. The basic political streams represented by the respective political parties are gradually developing and gaining or losing their political support.

We have analysed the stability of electoral support of six recent parliamentary political parties in all parliamentary elections from 1990, in which they or their ideological or organizational predecessors took part. We have specified as the region of support of the specific political party those districts (there are 79 districts, now serving as statistical spatial units only), in which the party has achieved

a higher percentage of support than its average in the whole. The stability of support is evaluated according to the number of parliamentary elections in which the party surpassed its state average result in specific districts. The results are shown in maps (Fig. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

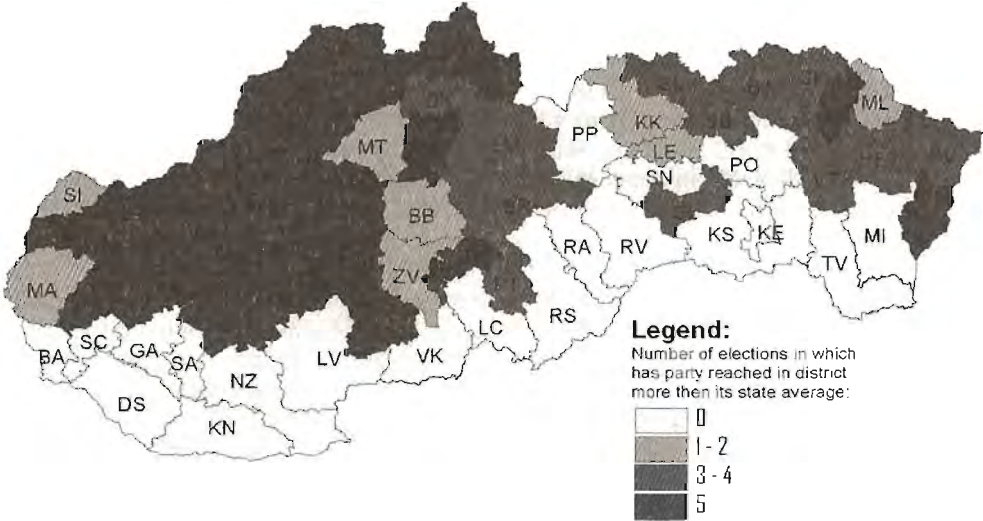


Fig. 5. Electoral support for HZDS in parliamentary elections

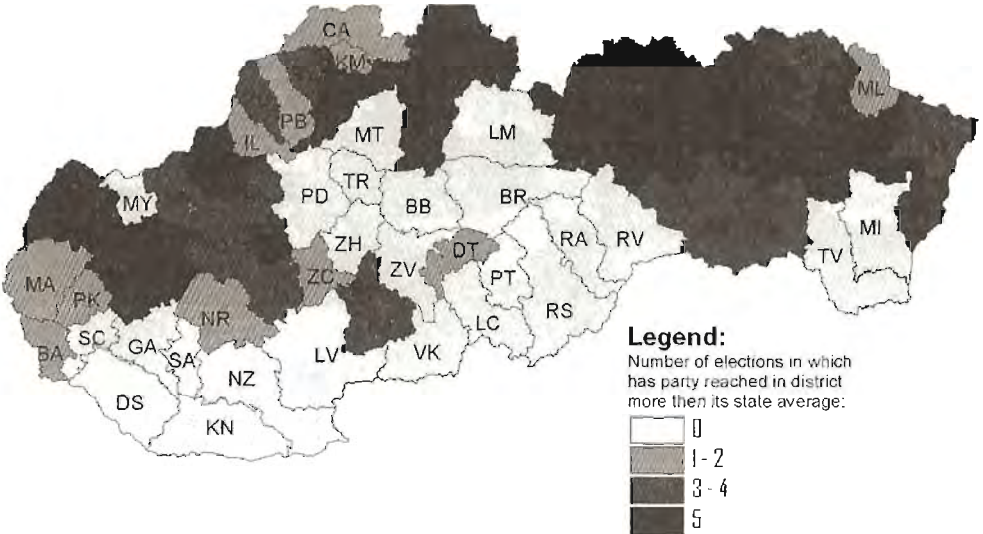


Fig. 6. Electoral support for KDH in parliamentary elections

Movement for Democratic Slovakia – Peoples Party (HZDS –LS)

HZDS has participated in five parliamentary elections and achieved the highest support in four of them. The Voter preferences of this centrist party, strongly related to the popularity of its leader, have declined from 37.26% in 1992 to 8.79% in 2006. The region of support for this party is concentrated in large territory of districts in north-western part of Slovakia with a high level of industrialization (Fig. 5).

Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)

KDH is a conservative rightwing party and has participated in all parliamentary elections (in 1998 as a part of SDK). Its support has declined from 19.21% (1990) to 8.31% (2006). The main territory of its electoral support covers rural areas of north-eastern and north Slovakia, with high level of religiosity. A third territory is formed by five districts in western Slovakia around Trnava, which is traditionally the main centre of the Roman Catholic Church (Fig. 6).

Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS)

SDKÚ has existed on the political scene only since 2000 and has run in the last two parliamentary elections, but the DS, unified with SDKÚ, participated in elections already from 1990. We have counted the results of other civic right wing or liberal parties, which were predecessors of SDKU and ran in elections, like ODÚ (1992) and DÚ (1994). This party is now the leading centre – right party with some liberal characteristics. Its support has increased from 15.09% (2002) to 18.35% (2006). The increase of support as a result of unification is even more obvious in comparison with the above mentioned small right wing civic parties ODÚ and DS, which could not pass the 5% limit to enter parliament, or with DÚ (8.57%). SDKÚ and the above mentioned parties had the best election results in districts around the biggest cities of Slovakia (Bratislava, Košice, Prešov, Banská Bystrica), in three districts under Tatras, and in Zahorie region in western Slovakia (Fig. 7).

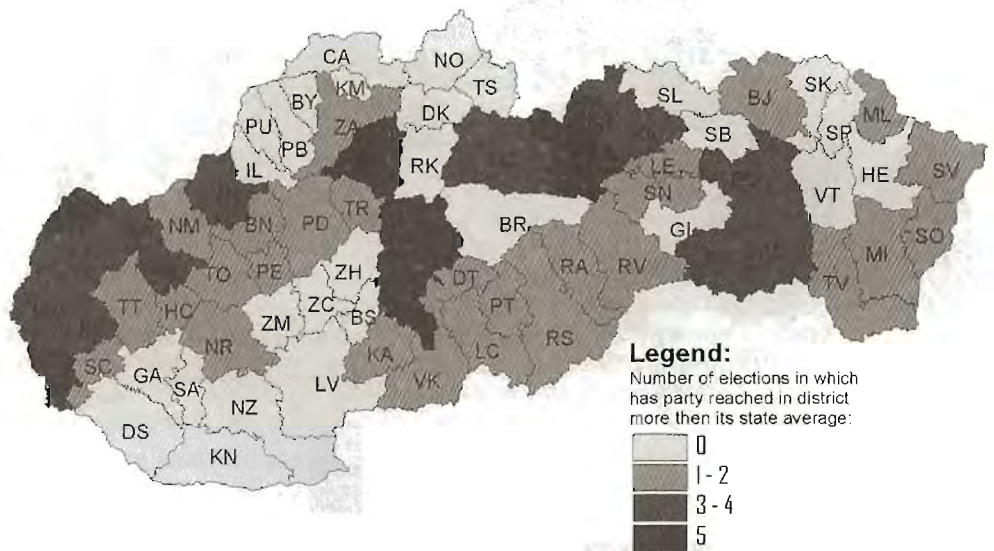


Fig. 7. Electoral support for SDKÚ-DS (ODÚ, ODS-DS, DÚ) in parliamentary elections

SMER – Social Democracy (SMER-SD)

Unification on the left side of the political scene has brought to life SMER-SD as a social-democratic party after 2002, although SMER has existed since 1999. Its support has increased from 13.46% (2002) to 29.14% (2006). Increase of support for the left side of the political scene is even more obvious than on the right side. The support of its main predecessor SĎL varied from 14.70% in 1992 to 10.41% (in coalition SV in 1994) and 14.66% in 1998. Specific for the support for these kinds of parties is, that they enjoy some level of support in almost all districts of Slovakia (Fig. 8), with the exception of six districts in the south-western part with strong support for the Hungarian parties and two districts in the northern part with strong support for Christian-democratic and national parties. The territory of strongest voter preferences is in districts of the north-eastern and eastern parts of Slovakia. The second region of support is in districts of central Slovakia and the third is in the western part of the country.

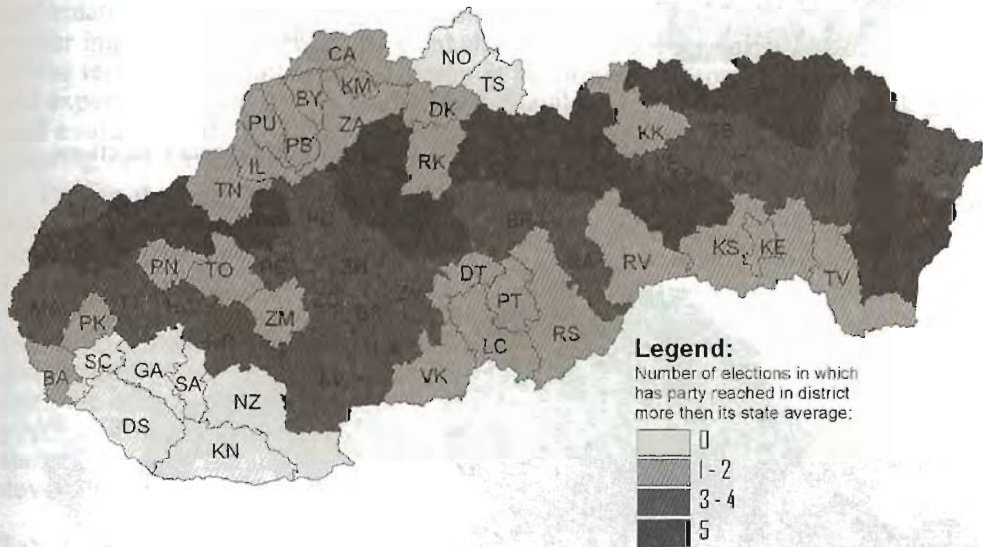


Fig. 8. Electoral support for SMER-SD (SDĽ, SV, SDSS) in parliamentary elections

Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK)

SMK has developed on a national basis and represents mainly the interests of the Hungarian minority. It has unified in 1998 three original Hungarian political parties Együttélés, MKDH and MOS, which ran together already as a coalition in all elections, with the exception of MOS in 1990 and 1992. Its support is stable and varies around 10%, which is the share of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The fact, that this party gained the support of almost the entire Hungarian minority in all parliamentary elections is obvious from Fig. 9. The region of support for SMK is in the 15 districts along the southern border of Slovakia, where the Hungarian minority lives and where the parties of the Hungarian coalition have gained more than their state average in every election. Their support in the rest of the territory of Slovakia is minimal.

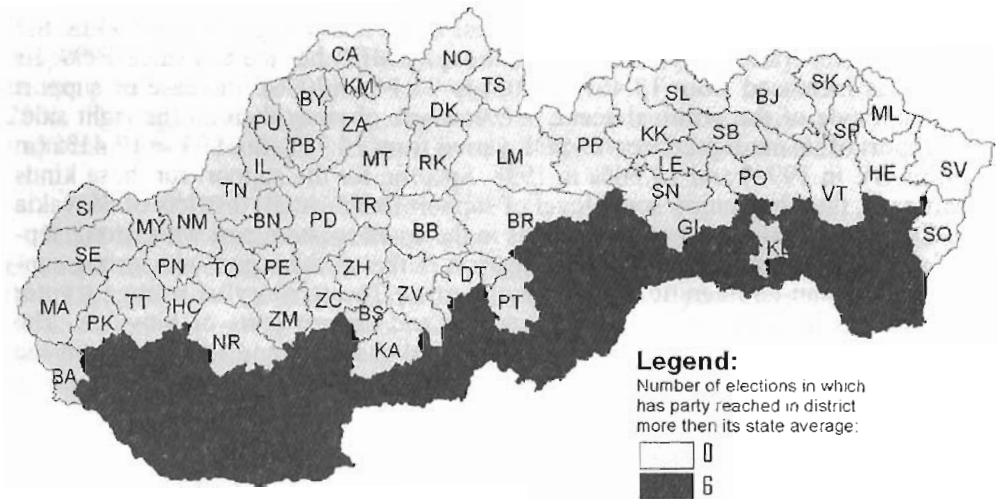


Fig. 9. Electoral support for SMK (MKDH, EGY, MOS) in parliamentary elections

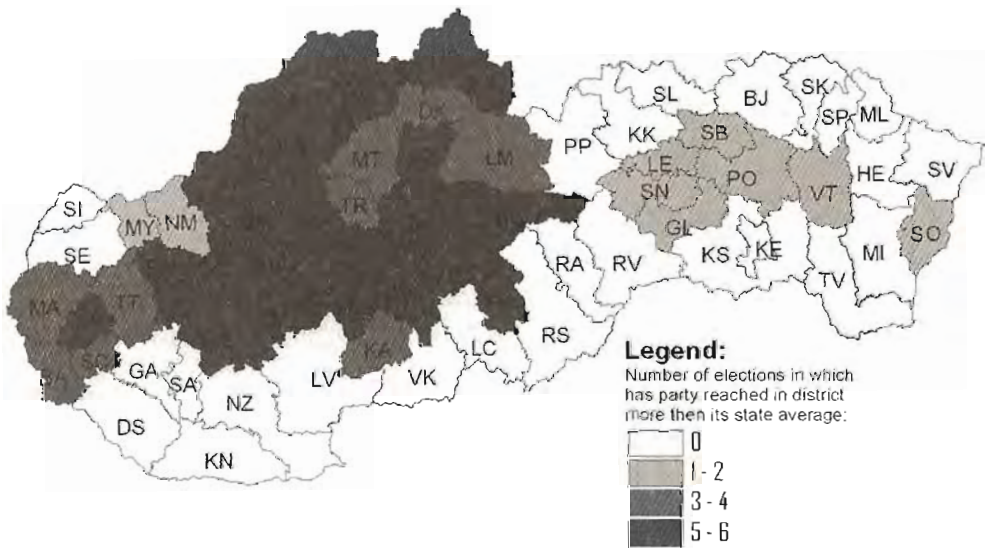


Fig. 10. Electoral support for SNS in parliamentary elections

Slovak National Party (SNS)

SNS declares that it is a conservative right wing party and its main goal is to protect the interests of the Slovak nation. It has run in all parliamentary elections and could not enter the parliament only in 2002, when it was divided into two parties. Its electoral support has varied from 13.94 % in the first election in 1990 to its minimum of 5.4% in 1994 after its main goal, the creation of an independent Slovakia was achieved and grew back to 11.73% in 2006. The region of electoral support for SNS is almost identical with the region of support for HZDS and is concentrated in the north-western part of the country (Fig. 10).

TERRITORIAL ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION – HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES AND THE LATEST REFORMS

Return to some of the historical models is relatively often applied when creating a new model of the spatial arrangement of public administration. For this reason, information on all historical stages and knowledge of related circumstances are rather important. Numerous historical changes are also reflected in the development of the territorial administrative division in the present territory of Slovakia. Historical experiences were widely studied (e.g. Slavík and Žudel 1994 and Guriák 2002) and evaluated within the new context after 1989 as one of the sources serving in drawing new territorial administrative division of the country.

During the long lasting historical period, from the 11th century up to 1990, ten major stages of territorial-administrative arrangement functioned in the territory of Slovakia. There are two main periods. First period concerns Slovakia as part of Hungary (from the mid 19th century within the Austro-Hungarian Empire) until 1918. During this time span of approximately nine centuries, five major stages of territorial-administrative arrangement existed. However, we equally register next five stages of territorial-administrative arrangement during the second period – from the establishment of Czechoslovakia to the year 1990 (i.e. the time span of 72 years). It has to be noted that this division is simplified and does not include some shorter stages of a transitional character that are considered the individual stages of development especially by historians (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Historical stages of territorial-administrative division of Slovakia until 1990

Stage	Territorial-administrative units					
	Makro	Number	Meso	Number	Local	Number
Hungary, Austria-Hungary						
11.-13.ct.	-	-	castle counties	17	castle areas	
13.ct.-1848	-	-	counties	21	districts	
1785-1790	military units	3	counties	21	districts	
1850-1860	military units	2	counties	17	districts	
1867-1922	-	-	zhupas	21	districts	95
Czechoslovakia, Slovak State during World War II						
1923-1928	-	-	great zhupas	6	districts	79
1928-1938	Land	1	-	-	districts	77
1940-1945	-	-	great zhupas	6	districts	60
1949-1960	-	-	regions	6	districts	99-100
1960-1990	great regions	3-4	-	-	great districts	33-38

Source: Slavík 2000

Almost a 1000 years of development of the spatial organization of the public administration on the territory of Slovakia until 1990 provides an opportunity to emphasize certain important points and add some general comments. The historical outline of the individual stages indicates a strong correlation between the changes of territorial-administrative organization and the principal changes in given state transformation processes. The only exception is represented by the year of 1960 when larger administrative units (regions, districts) inspired by the Soviet example were implemented. For the individual historical stages it may be concluded that the spatial organization of public administration had been determined by the natural environment (relief conditions) of Slovakia as well as of the state units within which the changes of territorial-administrative arrangement were taking place. While during medieval Hungarian Kingdom or later during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the systems of territorial-administrative organization were marked by a high degree of stability, during the Czechoslovak era the frequent change of individual models – often antagonistic – occurred. It is important to know that during the territorial-administrative development up to 1990, Slovakia was only once delineated as a single territorial-administrative entity (as “land” during 1928-1938) and only once was it a separate state unit (1940-1945). Surprisingly Bratislava fulfilled the function of capital city twice in its history. Besides the above mentioned period of 1940-1945 it was during the stage of counties for approximately 350 years, when the central parts of Hungary were under the control of the Ottoman Empire.

Basically four types of regions were applied so far in all historical stages – regions (as castle comitats, counties, zhupas in the number of 17 to 21, see Fig. 1), large zhupas and regions (6 units), military units and large regions (2-4 units) and land arrangement (one unit). Out of them, the system of counties – zhupas was the most stable, of longest duration and continuity, with minimal changes from the 13th century to the beginning of the 20th century. It is interesting that during the Czechoslovak era the last model – that of large regions in 1960-1990 – was the longest in operation. It was due to the totalitarian system with the maximum degree of state power centralization. During the entire period of the communist regime, the three level system of state administration (so called “national committees” at local, district and regional level) was implemented without any existence of self-government. At the lower level two types of districts were usual. The districts corresponding to natural gravitation areas (in the number of 77 to 100) were strongly prevailing, because the system of larger districts (33 to 38) was applied only once during the socialist period.

Public administration reforms after 1989 and their spatial aspects

The political organization below state level underwent substantial changes after 1989. It was clear that deep societal changes inevitably require a different public administration system. Despite optimistic expectations that reform of the public administration will be a simple and quick process, the opposite has been true – reforms in this field were in fact very long and almost permanent. Public administration was only one among various significant reforms that the post-socialist and new state needed. Destruction of inherited “socialist” public administration structures has been accompanied by many changes and related interim structures in the search for a more optimal sub-state government model. Nevertheless, certain features remained permanent and solid (based on Slavík 2000, Buček 2006b). It is especially

the case of the so called “dual model” of public administration represented by two separated lines of self-government and state administration, with strict distribution of powers between them expressed in legislation. The second main feature has been transition from a three level model of public administration (applied during socialism) to a two level model (local and regional), applied in both lines – self-government, as well as state administration. The third feature reflects the decentralization approach to reform. While the role of the institutions of self-government have been expanding, the state administration underwent substantial reduction of its position below the central state.

Local self-government has developed into a highly respected level of the government and one of crucial democratic institutions in Slovakia. Its renewal in 1990 can be considered the starting point of reforms in the field of public administration. Even thanks to the very consistent representation of more than 2800 municipalities by its two associations (Association of Towns and Municipalities, Union of Cities), local self-government has systematically built its respected position. Later, various reform documents (concepts, strategies) were prepared and selected changes were introduced into practice. All public administration reforms were strongly dependent on political will, were realized to a certain extent, different compared to the original proposals. The most typical case has been that of the originally proposed territorial division of the country on 12 regions finally not accepted by the Slovak Parliament in favour of 8 regions (despite preliminary political agreement), as presented on Fig. 11 and Fig. 12. It also meant that more than 10 years was needed until the second level of self-government was introduced in practical life. Regional self-government has been introduced only since 2002, and it gained more powers from the decentralization reform of 2002-2005.

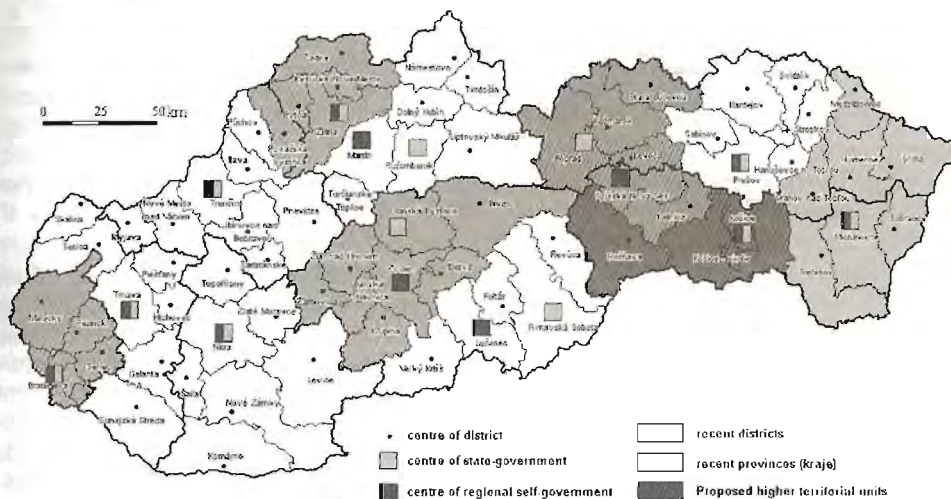


Fig. 11. Proposal for the administrative division of Slovakia into 12 regions

It was especially the state administration that underwent frequent changes and alternations of central governmental approaches, including extensive changes in the spatial distribution of its offices (see e.g. Slavík and Švoňavec 1996, Skyba 2007). Strong identification with the communist regime caused immediate cancellation of

the regional state administration in 1990. The district level organization inherited from socialist period remained valid until 1996. As a result of reforms a two level model of state administration with 8 regions and 79 districts was applied in the period 1996-2003. After decentralization there remained only a very narrow range of powers under the control of the state administration. This led to cancellation of both levels of general state administration (district offices in 2004, regional offices in 2007). Residual powers of state administration are executed by network of 50 area offices and by a networks of specialized field offices (tax offices, cadastral offices etc.) at present (more details on the current state administration functioning in Slovakia can be found in documents prepared by Ministry of Interior in 2007 and 2008).

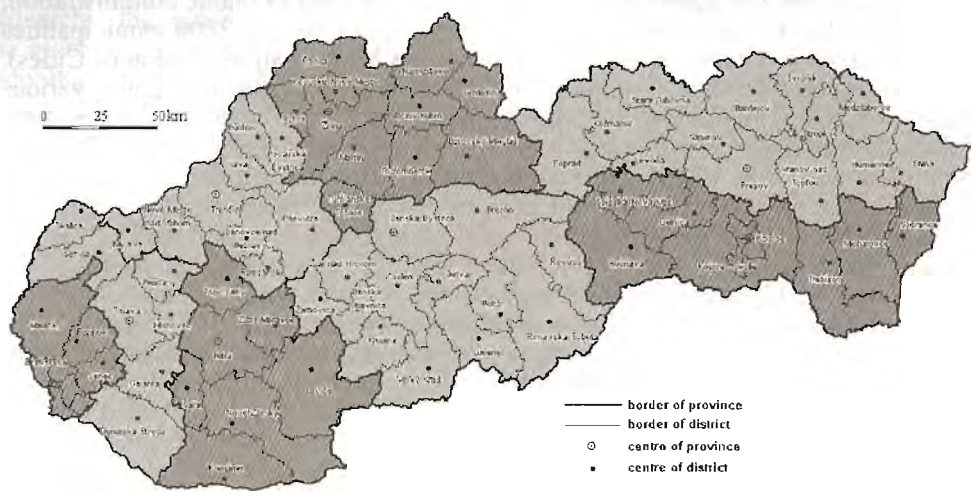


Fig. 12. Territorial organization of local state administration since 1996

MAIN FEATURES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AFTER 1989

The real “meaning” of self-governments is probably the crucial point when evaluating its role in a democratic political system. It can be concluded that during the nineties, under the pre-reform situation in public administration until 2001, the position of local self-government was characterized by less powers and more autonomy. As Buček (2006b) concluded, the current situation seems to have different features – increase in local self-government powers (strengthening of local autonomy in one sense) is balanced by more restrictions and rules in some fields (reducing local autonomy in an other sense). Local self-government has been satisfied with its strengthened position, expressed in more powers, more resources, more freedom in setting selected local tax rates, although there are still disputes on transfer of certain powers or sufficiency of available resources. Although it can be concluded that the role of state institutions was reduced and local self-government strengthened, specific balancing approaches such as sharing of powers and delegation of powers were also applied. The position of local self-government was also strengthened by the abolition of district offices of the state administration.

A more detailed legal framework for the functioning of local self-government functioning has been formulated within the reform. It reflects the need for more efficient decision-making, as well as for their clearer and less conflicting functioning. Certain limits, more sophisticated conditions and more demands on the functional of local self-government have been inevitable by-product of a far more demanding and quickly developing society. Such limits also confirm local self-government as a more important institution than before, having more powers and more resources under its control. They have partly reduced the scale of previous freedom. This is the case of legal rules introduced into local self-government activities previously without any guidelines (local self-government could act according to its own consideration). It gives local self-governments in many cases a more standard or less vulnerable position towards potential competitors. For example, a more detailed framework has been developed for intra-state as well as for international inter-municipal co-operation, as well as associations of municipalities. Significant change has come from new rules, which have stopped the never ending process of disintegration of municipalities. Nevertheless, these changes do not undermine local autonomy in a decisive way. Thanks to the changes, more rules and limits to local self-government are also balanced by clearer rules for outside intervention into their domain.

As a result of decentralization, many new powers are executed directly, more efficiently, with much higher local involvement and in respect to local interests. Local self-government now decides about important local issues like kindergartens and primary schools, social assistance and social care, health services, environmental protection, planning and development regulation and so on. The financial dimension of decentralization is clearly confirmed, for example, by increase of the incomes of local self-government. While before decentralization, the total income of local self-government was 32 718 mil SK (in 2001), it grew to 76 221 mil. SK in 2004 (current prices, Ministry of Finance 2002 and 2005). An important part of decentralization has been the right to free setting of local taxes rates valid since 2005 (including the main property tax), as well as clear determination of the local self-government share (70.3%) of personal income tax by legislation (Acts No. 564/2004 and No. 582/2004). However, moderate central state regulation in the local fiscal sphere has been reinforced by set of limits completely applied since 2005. It was a consequence of the financial troubles of more local self-government, especially in the field of local borrowing (Buček 2004b). More sophisticated budgetary rules, local budget structure, multi-annual and project based budgeting extensively modernized local finance practice. On the other hand, they simultaneously circumscribed freedom in local financial decision making (disputes over sufficiency of resources are not addressed in this contribution). Large attention has been paid to internal as well as external audit strengthening by setting more detailed and sophisticated conditions. The role of internal auditing, represented especially by the “chief auditor” (Slov. hlavný kontrolór) affiliated to local office, has continually increased. External auditing of final account’s and public procurement procedures is obligatory. More precise budgetary and accounting rules have been introduced. After the amendment of the Slovak Constitution (in 2005) the powers of National Auditing Office have been extended to all property, property rights and resources of local self-government, as well as to legal entities with their capital participation since 2006.

The Slovak system of local public administration has to adapt to problem of very fragmented local self-government units. The high number of local government units

(about 2,900) and the high share of very small municipalities among them (1930 municipalities had less than 1,000 people in 2006), has been a more pressing issue after decentralization of important powers to the local level. They cannot be efficiently administered in each separate municipality. This resulted in wider expansion of various forms of inter-municipal co-operation and associative life among municipalities as than before. Various problems, optimum organization, experiences in the field of inter-municipal co-operation in Slovakia have been analysed in Buček 1997, Kling 2003, Lovacká 2006, Slavík and Bačík 2007 and other works. The total number and forms of associations and co-operations is quite high and covers the whole country. They co-operate according to various kind of legislation – on local self-government, Business Code (establishment of joint “public” companies), or legislation on non-profit organizations. Many others are more functionally oriented for example towards the promotion of local economic development, tourism, infrastructure development (water and sewage), waste collection and disposal, environmental and sustainable development issues. We can find larger regional associations of local self-government unit as well as micro-regional ones representing co-operation between rural communities. At present, the most typical form of inter-municipal cooperation is the joint municipal office, serving the administration of various, mostly delegated powers for several municipalities. The most frequent powers covered by joint offices are land use and building order, local roads administration, daily social care, local schools administration, nature protection. The existence and scope of powers administered depend on the decision of the participating local self-government units. Despite the growing number of joint offices especially since the beginning of this decade, there are still some municipalities not included in joint office structures and applying execute selected powers individually. Due to difficulties with the administration of certain powers especially in such municipalities, the central state is preparing legislation that will force communes to co-operate in joint offices at least in certain powers. Due to the strong opposition of local self-government, we can only hardly expect such processes as amalgamation in Slovakia in the near future.

One of the key challenges for Slovak public administration system is the existence of ethnically mixed municipalities and regions. According to Buček (2004a) representation of minorities in local self-government improves the chances for more responsive decision making respecting minority needs. While participation of some minorities in local self-government is well developed, in the case of others it is not achieved. When focusing on the two most numerous minority populations in Slovakia – Hungarians and Romas, we can see differences in their ability to participate in managing local affairs by means of elected bodies. In the case of the Hungarian minority the effective control of local council is quite frequent and the number of mayors is quite high. However, in the case of the Roma minority only a few municipalities, although their number is slowly growing (Tab. 2). This overview is influenced by a widely exploited alternative used in Slovakia to stand for posts in local government an independent candidate (e.g. about one third of elected mayors in Slovakia act as independent). It should be mentioned that Slovak self-government has developed a large effort in successful management of various aspects of local life in ethnically mixed municipalities (see e.g. Buček 2001).

Besides general structure of local self-government organization, there developed specific arrangements concerning local self-government in the large Slovak cities. The two largest cities of the country (Bratislava and Košice) apply in full scale two

tier model of metropolitan self-government. Both levels – city wide and city quarters (Bratislava has 17 city-quarter, Košice 22 city quarters) self-government units have equal status according to legislation. Each city-wide, as well as city quarter self-government units has its own budget, and issues its own by-laws. Mayors on both levels are directly elected and citizens also elect councils on both levels. Their more detailed functioning is described in the Charter of the cities (e.g. concerning sensitive issues such distribution of powers and finances). For example, city-wide and city quarter level share particular parts of their income including as property tax and yield from personal income tax. The local self-government arrangement especially in Bratislava has been the subject of disputes (e.g. Buček 1999) and initiatives focusing on amendment or adoption of “new” individual national legislation on Bratislava and Košice. While there are supporters of a more centralized arrangement, there are also proponents of a more decentralized model of relations between city-wide and city quarter self-government.

Tab. 2. Position of the two largest minorities’ political parties in local self-government

Election year	Minority	Mayors	Mayors** (in %)	Councillors	Councillors** (in %)
1990	Hungarian	164	6.00	4,052	11.0
	Roma	2	0.07	88	0.2
1994	Hungarian	249	8.90	4,404	13.0
	Roma	2	0.07	72	0.2
1998	Hungarian	227+25*	8.70	3,841+324*	12.0
	Roma	6+2	0.30	100	0.3
2002	Hungarian	233	8.00	2,050	10.0
	Roma	11	0.40	112	0.5
2006	Hungarian	235	8.00	1,952	9.0
	Roma	14	0.50	213	1.0

* elected minority parties’ candidates plus coalitions with minority parties’ candidates

** percentages from total number of mayors/councillors elected in Slovakia

Sources: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (1990, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006), Roma Press Agency (2006)

Other larger cities often used alternative in Councils of City Quarters (VMCs). They have great potential for improvement of local democracy, more efficient self-government, and quality of local life. VMCs meetings are an important form of sub-local decision-making and a useful participatory field (Buček 1998). It is efficient link between the city and city quarters. It supports information flow on the work of City Council and City Office (explanation of decisions, strategies) to the city quarter. In the other direction, it is a channel indicating the problems of city quarters, presenting proposals for improvement, representing interests of city quarter citizens to the city-wide level. They are focused on many practical issues like environmental issues, physical environment, transport, public service delivery, the local schools system. Formulation of expenditure priorities concerning particular city quarters is one of the main roles of VMCs from a financial point of view. However, within the last decade, more cities reduced number of VMC, confirming the tendency toward larger units.

BUILDING REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

As was expressed in earlier sections, the meso-level of government was typical for territorial administrative organization in Slovak territory. Despite permanent debate after 1989, regions emerged as a level of the political and territorial organization of the country again only in 1996, but only as state administration bodies. Eight Regional Offices were established to administer set of powers de-concentrated from the central state. Regional self-government started to function from 2002 following elections in 2001. As Buček (2009) noted, the first period of its existence (2002-2005) can be interpreted as “starting and transitional”, dealing with practical issues of its establishment (buildings, staff, property), dealing with more stages of transfers of powers (mostly from the regional state administration) and circumscribed by missing autonomy in financial matters. The second period (2005-2008) is focusing on building the position of a more respected and efficient level of government. Their role has been strengthened by cancellation of the Regional Offices of the state administration since October 2007. The powers from these offices have been transferred to regional self-government and to specialized field offices of selected ministries. It has offered regional self-government status of dominant player at regional level of territorial and political organization.

Regional self-government was one of the key pillars of a general decentralizing reform. It had obtained its main powers in secondary education, the higher level of health care centres, social services, transport (regional roads), and regional culture. In most cases regional self-governments has extensively reorganised the services it manages, focusing on higher efficiency in their delivery (e.g. schools networks, hospitals). It has also turned to more diverse forms of delivery of public services – establishing of its own legal entities of various kind (companies, non-profit organizations etc.), or making contracts with external providers. Regional self-government has also taken an over important role in managing economic and social conditions in their respective regions thanks to their powers in regional planning. It is responsible for implementation, regular evaluation and updating of the Plan of for Economic and Social Development, more intensively intervening into shaping of national level regional development and policy. While state grants were the main source of finance for regional self-government activities until 2004, more autonomous financing started in 2005 (main source is 23.5% own portion of shared taxes). Efficient public services delivery, well focused decisions, combined with already achieved higher financial autonomy can improve the reputation of Slovak regional self-government.

Internationalization and Europeanization of regional self-governments is one of the important fields of its activities. There are no doubts that acceleration of the introduction of regional self-government and a substantial shift in the field of regional policy was strongly influenced by the general goal of integration into EU (e.g. Buček 2002, Korec 2005). As a result, regional self-government has been strongly oriented towards the EU. They regional institutions concentrate on three main directions in this perspective – efficient representation in Brussels, building partnerships and cooperation with other regions, improving their position toward managing EU funds. The regions are building their own international bilateral interregional cooperation on the formal (expressed by agreements), as well as the informal level. Usually regions have signed agreements with all neighbouring regions, regions from all neighbouring states and a set of other regions mostly from Europe. The

Slovak regions also followed ambitions of other European regions and turned their activity directly towards the European Union institutions. The house of Slovak Regions has functioned in Brussels as the joint representative office of the Slovak regions since 2005. The delegates are working on behalf of their region as well as in favour of Slovak regional government in general. The main aim of this mission is to improve information flows related to EU institutions, coordinate activities with other European regions, to intervene in fields of their interests, to act more extensively and efficiently in programming and implementation processes. Their last task is improving slowly since most of the powers concerning EU funds have remained in the hands of the central state.

Nevertheless, after less than ten years regional self-government can still be perceived as a newcomer to the Slovak political structure. The general perception of this level as less visible, less powerful, having less resources and initiative was reflected in both regional elections. They were characterized by very low electoral participation compared to all other elections held in Slovakia. For example, participation in the regional elections in 2005 was below 20% (Buček 2009). This seriously challenged the legitimacy of the main representative regional self-government bodies – chairperson and council, as well as reflecting the rather marginal role of the regions in Slovak political life. It is clear that quite a long period will be needed to develop a more stable and influential position within the Slovak political environment. This would make them a more powerful partner of already well established central state and local self-government institutions in Slovakia.

CONCLUSION

The new state development and transition situation has been accompanied by with various changes, adjustments and contradictory decisions concerning social and political life in Slovakia. It has encouraged quick expansion of political geographical research. The outline of developments in Slovak political geography presented here cannot be considered exhaustive. We cannot forget more theoretical works such as there by Ištók (1997) on political geography and the state, or Buček and Smith (2000) on local democracy. There are emerging new fields and new authors that will strongly influence the future direction of Slovak political geographical research. Among the new and quickly expanding fields we can consider cross-border co-operation that has attracted many geographers (Drgoňa 2001, Spišiak 2004 and Halás 2002 and 2005). Among the emerging group of younger Slovak political geographers we have to mention Verešš (2005), Gurňák (2007), or Fogaš (2008). Among the important contributions to political geography we can also find Slovak geographers working mostly in other fields of human geography. We can mention for example Paulov (1992 and 1996), Bezák (1996 and 1998), Ira (1996), Kollár (1996), Bašovský (1997), Ivanička (1999), Korec (2000 and 2005), Lauko (2000), Mládek (2001). Although the development of Slovak political geography is very hopeful, there are still some research directions not sufficiently covered (e.g. according to Buček 2006a).

Political geography is a solid part of geographical training in the Slovak universities. It is also a frequent part of the training of other social scientists (e.g. political scientists). Slovak political geographers are strongly linked to the decision making

authorities of Slovak society. Many of them participated in shaping important social and political reforms. The most typical case has been various stages of public administration reform. Geographers frequently provide consultations, analytical studies for various public sector bodies, including ministries in Slovakia, as well as for many other foreign institutions mostly in the EU dimension. One of the specific fields of activity close to political geography is preparation of specialists for public administration and self-government (especially at the Comenius University geography).

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