

2-1995

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Recommended Citation

Broun, Janice (1995) "Church-State Relations in Slovakia - October 1994," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol15/iss1/2>

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CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN SLOVAKIA - OCTOBER 1994

by Janice Broun

Janice Broun (Scottish Episcopal Church) is a prolific writer on Eastern European religious developments and a frequent contributor to REE. She visited Slovakia for the third time in September 1994, this time with the Dumfires and Galloway ACTS (All Christians in Scotland Together) ecumenical coach tour. This report is based on one to be published by La Nuova Europa (Seriata, Italy) and is published here with the author's permission.

Church-state relations in Slovakia since the breakup of Czechoslovakia have proceed fairly smoothly. Despite the intensity of persecution of the Slovak Catholic Church, religious practice is far more widespread in Slovakia and socially acceptable. There is considerably more enthusiasm, activity and readiness for social outreach than in Czech churches. Institutional church life is now well established. All the clergy I questioned felt that religious freedom is now secure.

Complete church-state separation and the cessation of subsidies for clergy stipends within four or five years is predicted. Subsidies for church reconstruction were suspended last year. Some church social work activity might continue to receive aid. Financial stringency reflects Slovakia's deteriorating economic situation; in the Visegrad Quadrilateral it has attracted only 4% of European investment. After the later Communist era in which it benefited from preferential treatment--on which Slovaks were never given the option of a referendum--Slovakia is drifting inexorably downwards into the East European Second Division. I will give a few examples of poverty. For forty years no church repairs were possible. Now, vast expenditure is needed, even to make churches safe. Parts of Kosice's Gothic Cathedral could crash down any day. The Catholic Church, which cannot afford to make it safe appealed to the government for help. All the government could do was to authorize a lottery.

Our stay in Bratislava was organized by the Executive Council of Churches of Slovakia, by the Lutheran Peter Pavlovic. He had to travel by bus; he had no car. The Reformed Church, the second largest Protestant church, with 200,000 members, owns one car. Its clergy cannot support families without additional earnings from their wives. It has had to open a new theological college, at Komarno, because students can no longer afford what to them are exorbitant fees and living costs at Prague or Budapest. Finally, anyone who has eaten at the Orthodox Seminary in Presov can appreciate how close their food is to the fast-day diet.

Restitution of church property has not proved the stumbling block it has been in the Czech Republic. Any problems in its implementation and that of other major spheres such as religious education in schools occur at the local and not the national level.

Property Restitution

Cardinal Jan Korec held up Slovak property restitution as a model for Europe while Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar commended it as "an act of historical justice intended to express support for the churches in their efforts to promote Slovak spiritual and national renewal."

Since Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (MDS) has never enjoyed an absolute majority, his government could not afford to antagonize the churches, which are more strongly rooted in traditionalist Slovakia than among the more secularist Czechs. Around 70% of Slovaks are Catholic, and although Protestants are a minority, as in the Czech Republic, they have traditionally exerted a political and economic influence out of proportion to their size. The Slovak cut off dates for religious property restitution, November 2, 1938, for Jewish and May 8, 1945, for Christian communities have not posed any problems, in contrast with the Czech cut off date. That one, February 15, 1948, was determined by Czech refusal to restore Sudeten German property.

The Catholic Bishops stressed that the church was not seeking its former wealth and power, only to ensure economic self-sufficiency. They promised that the Church would immediately turn over restored property for charitable purposes and thus return them to public use, leaving any surplus buildings to state ownership. Two of the reopened seminaries I visited had been reconverted from security police institutions.

The law of October 27, 1993, was broadly acceptable to ten out of the fifteen Slovak religious communities. Some Protestant churches expressed reservations about it. Pavel Uhorskai, Lutheran Presiding Bishop, pointed out that confiscation had depreciated values and that some former church properties had already been sold off under privatization without church permission.

The Jewish remnant of four thousand, however, (89,000 in 1940) felt that the three hundred properties they stood to regain would guarantee them financial independence.

The law was supported by the strongly Catholic Christian Democratic Movement (CDM), the Slovak National Party, and the Hungarian Democratic Movement. Only the Party of the Democratic Left, the former Communists, opposed it. Unlike the Czech settlement, it includes farmland, forests, and estates, which cover 1% of Slovak territory. Only land now occupied by state hospitals, social service institutions, and schools is exempt. President Michal Kovac, a former Communist who impresses Christians by his honesty and commitment to represent the interests of all Slovaks, intervened to get Parliament to amend the bill on constitutional grounds.

Church Schools and Religious Education

Church schools were closed in 1944 by the Slovak National Uprising's Revolutionary Committee, in reaction against President Jozef Tiso's attempt to establish a Catholic theocracy. Under Communism, religious instruction in schools by clergy had been possible but had such dire consequences on the child's educational and career prospects that only very devout parents opted for it. "So we produced nice semi-theologians," said

Fr. Anton Shrolec, formerly one of the Catholic underground's outstanding priests, the only Catholic priest to man the barricades during Bratislava's Velvet Revolution, a radical now at odds with his hierarchy. Discrimination against future Catholic priests also existed with all seminaries except Bratislava closed and no university graduates admitted. Protestants of all churches had to train together in Bratislava or Prague.

Now the churches are busy trying to make up for the lack of adequately educated and pedagogically qualified clergy and catechists. Catholic seminaries at Spis, Banska Bistrica, Trnava, Nitra, Presov and, this autumn, Kosice have been re-opened to meet the new needs and cope with the backlog of frustrated vocations.

Eleven denominations sought the return of 910 schools of which 673 are Catholic. Over a hundred, at every level, have now been re-opened though not without opposition from Communists in some places. Some schools, like the Bratislava bilingual English-Slovak Lutheran Gymnasium, are prestigious institutions providing the highest standards for students from all over Slovakia for nominal fees. This and the Reformed Church School in Kosice are open to other Protestants. "In such big projects it is better to develop ecumenical thinking and cooperation," Pavlovic commented.

Courses in religion or ethics were re-introduced into the school syllabus last year, though they are not yet mandatory during the first four years. Some primary school heads insist on a minimum of 35 pupils for such courses. Recruiting ethics teachers from the ranks of former teachers of atheist materialism or Russian language has not been difficult. An interesting new development is the participation of mature and competent Catholics as trainers for some ethics courses.

Twice as many children choose religion rather than ethics; though at secondary level, nationwide, 6,000 more pupils prefer ethics to religion.

Considerable regional variations reflect different levels of religiosity. In urban areas and the deeply secularized south, ethics are preferred. Bartolomej Gooz, General Secretary of the Reformed Church which is strongest in the area near the Hungarian border told me, "In our villages, parents are divided 50/50. They aren't sure that the Communist regime will not return so they think it's safer for the child to take ethics, despite our assurances." In the north and east, parents do not have such fears and most children receive religious instruction.

Eastern Rite Catholics Versus Orthodox

Bitter relations between Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Eastern Slovakia is perhaps the most intractable problem inherited from Communist interference. Many members of these churches are Ruthenian (Ukrainians who are culturally distinct from Ukrainians in Ukraine through their having been under Hapsburg rule). Because of the adverse connotations of being Ukrainian under Communism, most claim to be Slovak.

In autumn 1994 twenty Catholic churches and presbyteries were still in Orthodox hands. Officially 38,000 people have chosen to remain Orthodox. Fr. Milan Gherka puts the number at nearer 60,000. He told me that in July, police were brought in to Sukov village to enforce the law. In another village, Jarabina, where there are no documents proving it belonged to the Catholics the mayor closed the church. The Orthodox who have 400 families there recovered it but are now expecting an attack from the 80 local Catholic families backed by Catholics from other villages.

The Greek Catholic Church, thanks to its resistance to persecution is flourishing and its more educated members are anxious for dialogue with the Orthodox so as to put the past behind them. I got the impression that Protestants sympathize with the plight of the Orthodox, who were deprived of all the churches they had gained under Communism under the new Catholic-influenced law of 1990. "This dispute was created by Communism," said Pavlovic.

Interchurch Relations

Most churches are prepared to cooperate, Pavlovic said.

Our big problem is how to tackle our Communist heritage and we are not yet clear how this should be done. The Ecumenical Council has six full and four associate members. It is very important that the Roman Catholic Church participates as an observer. As a result of our complicated history, there is a big gap between them and the Protestant minority; Lutherans are the next largest church with 7 to 8%, the Reformed church next. At the end of the sixteenth century, 90% of Slovaks were Protestant but the Counter Reformation, with killings and forcing people into slavery almost eliminated Protestantism. It is not so easy to develop dialogue and cooperation with this history. Under Communism it wasn't possible to develop any relationships. The most important thing was to survive. Now we have to discover a *modus vivendi*."

They are cooperating well in the Ecumenical Council; at the local level, they have more to learn.

The Churches, Politics and the Minorities

Informed Czechs I met in 1993 felt that the Slovak Catholic bishops shared a considerable part of the blame for the breakup of Czechoslovakia. They said the bishops had overemphasized Slovak national identity and, in a simplistic way, trusted Meciar's unrealizable pledges to maintain the same level of employment as under Communism and to keep the social services intact. In Prague, Fr. Vaclav Maly, former Charter 77 spokesperson, admitted great disappointment in their failure to distance themselves from the government. Another Czech, Dr. Oto Madr, a leading theologian of the underground, now editor of *Teologické Texty*, a participant in twice-yearly confidential meetings with Slovak bishops and Catholic politicians, commented "with us, they are critical, but they lack the courage to speak out openly against the government." A former Federal Parliament deputy accused them of naivety in their aim of realizing Christ's kingdom on

earth, by hoping for a reintroduction of a theocracy like Tiso's. Tiso remains a stumbling block in relations between Catholics and Protestants, who played a prominent role in the Slovak National Uprising against the Nazis. On the ecumenical level, a re-examination of his role and informed discussion is urgently needed.

In contrast, Protestants from mainstream churches strongly opposed the split of Czechoslovakia. Evangelicals like Baptists and Pentecostals prefer to steer clear of politics.

Gooz, a Hungarian, feels that allowances must be made for the Slovaks; "We must try to understand how they are trying to discover their own identity after a thousand years of being ruled by other nationalities."

Although a keen Christian Democratic Movement supporter and friend of former President of Slovakia and the Christian Democratic Movement leader, Jan Carnogursky, Srholec is critical of its naivety and failure to distinguish between religion and politics. It has little in common with other European Christian Democratic parties. Under Communism, Slovaks had been isolated from surreptitious Western contacts. Charter 77 hardly gained a foothold, Carnogursky being the exception. The opposition to Communism was virtually the Catholic Church which built up a superbly organized underground. "Deprivation of the vital civic dimension handicaps Slovak Catholic adjustment to democracy and pluralism," Srholec argues. "For forty years Christians were deprived of access to higher education, technology, science, and the economy. Compared with the Communists and other parties, we are dilettantes. Although the Christian Democratic Movement includes respected Protestant leaders, its image is so Catholic, ultra pious and conservative that it alienates most Protestants." He felt the Christian Democratic Movement needed to become a more broadly based Christian party with its priorities democracy and national unity.

The Catholic Church, he feels, concentrated too much on the sacraments, "not on training and teaching Christians to understand what it is to be a Christian in the world. Thus, despite its numerical strength, it exerts little influence on political, economic or cultural life." He commends Protestants as more ready to send lay members for training in the West and to give them responsibility. Our ACTS group members who visited Protestant churches in Bratislava, however, found them very conservative liturgically. Fergus McPherson, our ebullient Presbyterian minister, caused a sensation by arousing laughter in his sermon. Two Slovak boys who had come back with us, after attending a Scripture Union camp on Arran, commented that they had never before known laughter in a Slovak church service.

Srholec berated his episcopate for its failure to support Carnogursky, especially in view of the spiteful denigration he suffers from Meciar, "who has a mind like a computer. As a Soviet-trained Communist, Meciar seeks to bring us back into the Russian sphere of influence." He felt that the bishops' letter before the elections should have spelt out more clearly the Christian duty to support Christian democracy.

Although none of those I interviewed felt that religion would be endangered by Meciar, all but the Orthodox deplored the gullibility of the many simplistic Christians who succumbed to his charisma. They were ashamed of the reputation he had gained for Slovakia, of his government's failure to address its basic industrial and economic problems.

In December 1993, Carnogursky and leaders of various religious, political, and cultural groups joined with President Kovac in criticizing Meciar following a controversial (leaked) speech to Communist activists in which he threatened to crush internal opposition when the time is ripe. Civic Democratic Youth accused him of resorting to "political practices used by Communist regimes." From independent sources, I learned of continued security monitoring and interception of mail and fax of Christian doctors, both Catholic and Protestant.

In March 1994, Meciar was forced to resign by Kovac and his ministers, only to re-emerge as victor, with 35% of the vote in the October elections. The electoral bloc led by former Communists, Common Choice, finished a poor second with 10.4%, the Hungarian group third at 10.2%. The Christian Democratic Movement did better than expected, coming fourth at 10.1%. Responsible Christians fear that Meciar will take revenge on Kovac, who refused to be his stooge, by putting pressure on Parliament to replace him.

Slovaks have co-existed peacefully for centuries alongside Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians, and Jews, but with independence it inherited almost all the minorities. With two glaring exceptions, the status of minorities is satisfactory.

Fr. Srholec, who is engaged in a flourishing Jewish-Christian dialogue, feels that the Jews are under no threat. Among positive and sensible steps taken by Josef Moravcik's interim coalition government which followed Meciar's downfall in spring was the invitation of prominent Israelis to the celebration connected with the Slovak National Uprising. Government representatives were able to show that many Slovaks received awards for saving Jews. Srholec, who is also Vice President of the Slovak Helsinki Monitoring Committee, has close Jewish contacts and has visited Israel along with his friend Vaclav Maly. He maintains that the Slovak record of protecting Jews is better than that of the Czechs, Poles, or Hungarians, that the Slovak anti-Semitism was socio-economic rather than cultural in origin and is now confined to old people and a few skinheads.

The 600,000 Hungarians and 400,000 Romany have served as convenient scapegoats for Meciar's government failures and responsible church people are deeply disturbed by the implications of Meciar's vote-catching xenophobia.

The Communists, fearing the Hungarians, granted them a privileged minority status with their own newspapers, schools, and access to the media. Meciar's government systematically eroded this. Hungarian signs were removed; Slav names and suffixes were made compulsory for birth registrations and women's surnames; local government boundaries were redrawn into narrow north-south regions which put the Hungarians in a minority in every area, although along the southern frontier they constitute 80 to 90% of

the population. Increasing insecurity has reinforced the Hungarian demands for autonomy. Meciar, adept at playing on popular feelings, compares them unfavorably with other minorities; "they alone are struggling for collective not civil rights," he said in a pre-election speech. "Hungarians don't have Slovak hearts. In our south, Slovaks feel like foreigners."

Slovakia's minority policy has failed to meet European standards except during the interim government which made positive sensible moves to reduce tensions between Slovaks and Hungarians. Over the border, Gyula Horn's new Hungarian government opened by reaffirming Hungary's respect for existing boundaries. All this progress could be reversed under the next Slovak government. The fact that the three Hungarian coalition parties picked up 10.2% of the vote, reflecting their proportion in the population, reveals their fears.

Although the Hungarian border region is the most secularized region of Slovakia, the Reformed Church is largely, and the Catholic and Lutheran Churches partially, Hungarian. Thus they experience the practical problems of bilingual congregations. Hungarian Catholics have demanded a bishop of their own nationality. These demands were rejected by the bishop with responsibility for Hungarians, Trnava's assistant bishop, Mgr. Dominik Hrusovsky. His reasons--that Hungarians do not provide sufficient Catholic babies and that their priests have a bad record of moral lapses--were not such to endear him to his flock. Difficulties do arise where the clergy person speaks only Slovak. In Komarno, where the Lutheran minister Radko comes into this category the Reformed Church loan a minister to preach a Magyar sermon once a month. Gooz believes that had it been left to the Communist party separate Hungarian churches would probably have been liquidated before 1989. He gave the far more intelligent Secret Police the credit having eased pressures on them.

The Romany are quite another problem. Deeply divided, often unemployed, tossed back and forth by local authorities in both republics, though, thanks to Communist policies of integration, they are not as disadvantaged as Roma further east. I heard allegations of continued sterilization of women after giving birth, without their knowledge or consent. There is no doubt that many communities feel threatened by them and are very much on their guard. Again, churches need to give clear guidelines and to be ready to defend the rights of Romanies if necessary. Nominally they are Catholic. Individual Christians are working among them, though it is a demanding and specialized ministry. Greek Catholic theology lecturer Fr. Georgi Novotny has Roma among his students and told of a Roma nun who works among her community in Presov but deploras the unwillingness of well-heeled Roma to fund social work.

A priority for the churches will be to counteract politicians who try to inflame national tensions and make the Christian viewpoint clear in the coming months. The increase in the Christian Democratic Movement vote--4% higher than the estimate of my Czech political friend--indicates that an increasing number of Christians are ready to support democracy.

It took Meciar over two months of near stalemate to form a government, but he already has control of state radio, television, and Security and has cancelled 55 of the previous government's privatization projects. The only partners he could find are extremist, the far right Slovak National Party and far left Slovak Workers Party, which is run by a near illiterate, advocates state control over almost all spheres of life is opposed to the European Union, NATO and the International Monetary Fund. Gooz had commented: "I only hope he has to rule with a coalition of other parties." He will not be very happy about this coalition. Fr. Srholec writes, "The struggle for democracy is not yet finished."