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Pieter van Duin and Zuzana Polácková

Submission, survival, salvation:
The political psychology of nationalist populism in post-communist
Slovakia

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Rather than at a specific "right-wing" populism or right-wing extremism, racism, anti-semitism and the like, this paper will look at populism in a somewhat broader sense and at its connection with nationalism as it reveals itself in the Slovak case. What is populism? Is it exclusively a political phenomenon, a type of political movement or ideology? It is only partly that. Populism often appears in the form of a political movement, but its ideology is usually vague and ill-defined. This is because populism typically tries to appeal to many different interests, social motives and sentiments at the same time, addressing "the people" as a whole, and because it has a lot to do with what is known in the German language as *gesundes Volksempfinden*. This infamous but pointed expression suggests that populism is also part of the realm of social psychology, of the interaction of prejudice and demagogy, and of course of a historical and socio-cultural context within which it can flourish. An important, classical question in this connection is the nature of populist leadership, more often than not the single charismatic leader. He may be motivated by a sheer lust for power, by a genuine conviction or "populist" ideological construct, or by a mix of both. Similarly, a populist movement may include opportunists and criminal elements as well as sincere idealists and a variety of different ideologists such as nationalists and ethnocentric socialists - indeed often people who are inspired by a combination of the "national" and the "social" ideological elements. If populism is more likely to prevail in countries with a relatively low level of institutional stability or democratic maturity, this does not mean that even the most "advanced" nations are immune to it (see Belgium, Denmark, Austria, etc.). Modern populism, after all, is closely associated with mass politics and the electoral process based on universal suffrage. The "age of democracy" is the age of popular mobilization, and this is not necessarily tantamount to a higher political or moral civilization.

It is obvious that a country where a man like Vladimír Mečiar won 43% of the vote - and between 45-50% of the ethnic Slovak vote - in a presidential election less than two years ago, has a populist problem. As the charismatic leader of the "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia" (HZDS) and Slovak Prime Minister during most of the period 1992-1998, Mečiar was both the most popular and the most powerful man in the newly independent Slovak Republic.

The emerging HZDS political elite came to comprise a large number of old communists besides nationalists, and their liberal democratic opponents failed "to cope with the populist and nationalist mobilization of that segment of the population that was not in favour of the [Czechoslovak] economic reforms", as one Slovak analyst concluded in 1994.¹ Far from having been eliminated under communism, Slovak nationalism had actually flourished during much of this period and so did the culture and mentality of populism with their deep roots in Slovak history.

During his years in office Meciar introduced his own particular form of economic and political transformation, with a clientelist and corrupt process of privatization of state industries resulting in the creation of an increasingly authoritarian regime that has been characterized as a semi-criminal "kleptocracy" (a power structure of thieves). The plundering of a substantial part of Slovakia's economic assets through such practices as fraudulent bankruptcies and highly intransparent privatization deals and the illegal self-enrichment of numbers of HZDS political figures and HZDS-connected would-be businessmen were, especially during 1994-8, typical features of the Meciar regime. Interestingly enough, this state of affairs did not lead to a disintegration of the electoral support base of either the HZDS or its main coalition partner the Slovak National Party (SNS). Perhaps it was considered natural by these parties' rank and file that the political bosses, who increasingly acted as though they were the exclusive owners of the state in a manner reminiscent of the days of communism, took their due share of the national property. But more important was the fact that the populist charisma of Vladimír Meciar and the sustained demagogic propaganda of the nationalist-populist camp effectively appealed to the insecure minds of nearly half of all ethnic Slovaks.

Perhaps it is surprising, perhaps not, that the same kind of people who illegally appropriated slices of the national wealth could also pose as the most fanatic defenders of Slovak independence and the Slovak people. In addition, of course, there were the more ideologically genuine, socially austere nationalists, but many of them rallied around Meciar as well when in the early 1990s he rapidly emerged as the dominant voice of Slovakia's national interests. Thus it could happen that Slovakia became as notorious for its brand of authoritarian populist political culture, the politics of "Meciarism",² as for its systematic corruption and clientelist practices. In Slovakia - but not only in Slovakia - it is quite possible to be a populist politician and a robber of the nation at the same time. This is because both are products of the absence of a stable institutional and democratic life, of tolerating and knowing no other political culture than one that includes the regular abuse of power legitimated by ideological phrases, of a long tradition of widely supported populist politics. Even if some political figures were opportunists, the fact remains that the populist "mental universe" has been a crucial political, psychological and socio-cultural reality in twentieth-century Slovakia. Thieves and liars would never be able to pose as nationalists and demagogues could never influence the people to the extent they did and do, if there was no potential among a substantial segment of the population for them to exploit, if there did not exist certain social and psychological

preconditions for the politics of populism.

2

In a seminal work published more than three decades ago it was argued that comparative, interdisciplinary research on the complex phenomenon of populism must address at least six important questions.³ It may be worth our while to look at these points once again, if only because little interpretive work on the topic has been done since. First, there is the question of the relative importance of ideology and movement and the relationship between these two dimensions of populism. Second, the problem of the populist mentality and the socio-historical question of how far it is the result of the weakness of the middle classes. Third, the crucial issue of what can be termed the "political psychology" of populism, i.e. the existence of a series of rather maniac, paranoid notions regarding the threat of external enemies conspiring against the people or the nation. Fourth, the negativism of populism, the fact that it defines itself in defensive, antagonistic terms, like anti-foreigner, anti-capitalist, and so on. Fifth, populism's peculiar worship of "the people", i.e. the suffering, persecuted, oppressed people, often amounting to a populist or national martyrology. Sixth, the tendency for populism to be closely associated with, sometimes to be absorbed by, stronger, more cohesive ideologies like nationalism or socialism.

These questions, as recapitulated and slightly reformulated above, are still highly relevant when probing the phenomenon of populism. An analysis of the Slovak case provides strong evidence confirming this. We propose to take up the concept of "political psychology" and somewhat broaden it to include points three, four and five. In other words, the political psychology of populism in our use of the term refers to forms of political irrationalism like persecution (conspiracy) mania, a pattern of defensive attitudes and political negativism, and a strong disposition to indulge in collective, ideological self-pity and national martyrology. All of these features are clearly present in the national mythology and pathology of Slovak populism as it expresses itself, among other things, in the dramatic, romantic notion that for more than a thousand years the Slovak people, and in an even more critical sense their national leaders,⁴ were held in a position of national submission imposed by Hungarians, Czechs, etc. Although Slovakia became independent in 1993, there still are claimed to be many hidden and visible threats operating against the national freedom of the Slovak people and Slovak state sovereignty, notably on the part of the historical enemy the Hungarians, the domineering, arrogant West, and so forth.

As for the other issues mentioned above, it is clear that the Slovak variant of populism is closely connected with nationalism. Populism may be regarded as the predominant way in which nationalist ideology is translated into a political movement under the specific social, cultural and historical conditions prevailing in Slovakia. No doubt part of the explanation for this is the historical weakness of the Slovak middle classes, preventing the emergence of a strong socio-political ethos associated with civil society, democratic institutions and

constitutionalism. Slovak populism in the form of Meciar's HZDS is, rather than a clear-cut ideology, first of all a political movement characterized by a particular mentality and psychology, underpinned by a post-communist composite of different ideological elements the sum total of which cannot easily be defined as either "left" or "right". The only ideological constant in Slovak populism is nationalism, an elaborate mythical structure that is itself difficult to define in left/right terms, and to this is added a "rightist" portion of cultural traditionalism and a "leftist" ideological element of "social justice". With regard to Slovakia therefore - and no doubt the same is true for some of the other post-communist countries as well - it is not very helpful to focus on a specific "right-wing" populism. It is more to the point to employ the term "nationalist populism",⁵ or perhaps "ethnocentric populism".⁶ Furthermore, Slovak populism is not only closely connected with a historical nationalism, but its present-day manifestations also have to be seen in the specific context of post-communist political reality. This means, *inter alia*, that the social protection of those lower strata which are considered part of populism's electoral support base and whose immediate interests are threatened by painful economic reforms has become part of its programme and rhetorical repertoire. This is true for the HZDS - perhaps less so for the more rightist SNS - as well as for the ex-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), some of whose leaders and rank and file are equally susceptible to both the "socialist" and ethno-nationalist elements of the populist syndrome. Thus in Slovakia and much of the post-communist East the conventional picture of a left/right political spectrum makes little sense. The political struggle is primarily one between those who want to promote pluralist democratic structures and populist-nationalist forces that seem to advocate, implicitly if not openly, one variant or another of a non-liberal post-communist "third way".

Slovak nationalist populism, then, both in its dominant HZDS form and more generally, is characterized by a typical ideological eclecticism. To a large extent it represents a historically evolved set of attitudes, a political psychology, rather than a programme. It is the political psychology, the populist discourse, of what may be termed "submission, survival and salvation". The Slovak people and its leaders, so this discourse runs, have long been held in submission, and are still in danger of being relegated back to this oppressed position. The Slovak nation has survived its thousand-year ordeal through stubborn if passive perseverance.⁷ Its very survival, indeed, can almost be considered a miracle, but the suffering people were bound to be redeemed through a final act of political salvation, i.e. the achievement of national freedom and sovereignty. It was Meciar who could claim to have been instrumental in accomplishing this state of salvation. In November 1999, for example, he said that "we Slovaks rose from life as a nationality to become a real, living country ... Nobody before me for thousand years was able to accomplish this".⁸ It is no accident that the political psychology and mythology of Slovak nationalist populism has strong religious, almost eschatological overtones. Every nationalist ideology is a kind of civil religion, but Slovak nationalism was largely shaped, first by Lutheran pastors and sentimental Protestant writers and intellectuals in the course of the

nineteenth century, then by populist Catholic priest-politicians during the first half of the twentieth century. That the political culture of populism subsequently became a major expression of Slovak nationalism as a political movement is perhaps not surprising given the specific historical, social and political conditions in Slovakia.

3

In April 1998 Vladimír Mečiar, then at the height of his power, addressed the party convention of the HZDS in a speech that lasted almost one hour and was broadcasted live on politically manipulated Slovak state television. For many who watched this event, including the present authors, it was an amazing spectacle, hilarious and shocking at the same time. Mečiar said, among other things, that "the HZDS was formed as a non-ideological movement of citizens, standing on three pillars: national values, Christian values and social justice". He also declared: "we can proudly announce to Slovakia and others that the basic tasks of a national-democratic revolution, emancipation and freedom for Slovaks have been accomplished". A.M. Hák, one of those prominent party members who love to pose as national HZDS ideologist, maintained that "Providence sides with those who have the will to be free and the desire to perfect themselves. We have that will".⁹ The HZDS, obviously in a self-confident, even megalomaniac mood, proclaimed the goal of winning a majority of parliamentary seats in the general election to be held in September that year.

In Mečiar's and Hák's statements we encounter some of the typical elements of populist rhetoric and propaganda. It was explicitly asserted that the HZDS is a "non-ideological" (neither left nor right) national political movement, whereby the fact that an organization which had been in power for almost six years was still styling itself a "movement" may be regarded as just another illustration of the peculiarly nondescript but real dynamics of populism.¹⁰ Of course the HZDS claims to represent the interests of the state, the nation, the ethnic Slovak people as a whole. Within such a perspective the "pillar" of "national values", even if remaining undefined, is a sufficiently satisfactory phrase, as is "national freedom", national emancipation or even "national-democratic revolution". Typically, national freedom is sanctified as a goal in itself and is not connected with the democratic idea, although the HZDS's very name itself suggests its understanding of the need to pay at least lip service to "democracy". The term "national-democratic revolution" ("whose basic tasks have been accomplished", etc.) is a piece of jargon derived from the ideological arsenal of Leninism, showing the post-communist dimension in contemporary Slovak nationalist populism. The power of the political "will", on the other hand, would seem to be an expression derived from the phraseology of a long-standing, potentially authoritarian Slovak nationalism as well as the dictatorial Slovak war-time state. The "pillars" of "Christian values" and "social justice" may be regarded as the "right wing" and the "left wing", respectively, of the "non-ideological" all-in movement that the HZDS wishes to be. Nevertheless,

the role of Providence and the meaning of Christian values were not left uncontested as, almost simultaneously with the HZDS convention, a number of Slovak Catholic bishops voiced their concern about the trend of events in HZDS-ruled Slovakia.¹¹

The HZDS failed to achieve its objective of gaining a parliamentary majority in the September 1998 election. The percentage of votes cast for the HZDS plus its major ally the extreme-nationalist SNS declined from 40.4% in 1994 to 36.1% in 1998. But with 27% of the vote the HZDS remained the largest party in Slovakia, and the combined support for both nationalist-populist parties did not fall in absolute terms (it even slightly increased) or as a share of the adult, enfranchised population. In villages and communities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, i.e. in the rural areas where not much less than half of all Slovak citizens live, the percentage of votes cast for HZDS and SNS only slightly decreased from 43.4% in 1994 to 41.6% in 1998.¹² Moreover, these figures are national aggregates. If the votes of the sizeable Hungarian minority (almost 11% of the population of the Slovak Republic), of whom practically no one would vote for either of these strongly anti-Hungarian parties, were deducted, in other words if we looked at the voting behaviour of the ethnic Slovaks only, we would find a level of support for HZDS plus SNS which is several percentage points (probably about 4-5%) higher than the national average.

The stable support base for Meciar was confirmed by the results of the direct presidential election held in May 1999. The second round of this election was a contest between Meciar and Rudolf Schuster, the eventual winner. With a relatively high voter turn-out of 75.5% (8.7% less than in the crucial 1998 general election), 42.8% in the country as a whole and 49% in the rural areas voted for Meciar, who won in 38 of Slovakia's 79 districts. It is safe to conclude that more than 45% of ethnic Slovaks, and the majority of ethnic Slovaks living in the rural areas, voted for Meciar. Meciar was supported not only by HZDS and SNS voters, but also by the majority of those who vote for small leftist parties with a strong populist tendency like the Slovak Communist Party (KSS) and the Association of Slovak Workers (ZRS). Furthermore, particularly strongly represented among Meciar voters were blue-collar workers, farmers, the unemployed, the lower-educated and the older generations.¹³

The fact that in September 1998 the ZRS, Meciar's second coalition partner during the years 1994-8, had remained below the 5% threshold set for parliamentary representation, plus the fact that the anti-Meciar parties now succeeded in reducing the number of wasted ballots through coalition-building and in more effectively mobilizing their supporters than in 1994, is what prevented another victory of the populist and nationalist forces.¹⁴ Thus this time Meciarism, though retaining strong support, was outmanoeuvred in the electoral process and subsequently assigned the new role of an opposition movement. The Meciar regime had tried to create a "state ideology" characterized by "protectionist, nationalist and isolationist sentiments", as one analyst has put it.¹⁵ After September 1998, Slovak populism continued to promote these sentiments and actually stepped up its anti-Western and isolationist rhetoric.

Only by 2000 did the HZDS, but not the SNS, begin to make what looked like a tactical turnabout and to express a more integration-oriented political language.

4

The Meciar regime's legal and illegal attempts to help bring about a favourable outcome of the 1998 general election proved insufficient to ensure another nationalist-populist triumph. This made the political consequences extra painful for the Meciar camp. After it had become clear that the government would be taken over by an anti-Meciarist four-party coalition representing a majority of over 60% of parliamentary seats, Meciar in his frustration actually rebuked the Slovak voters for rejecting the "Slovak way" propagated by the HZDS. At least as interesting was what HZDS vice-chairman H?ka had to say in a series of articles published in the pro-Meciar newspaper *Slovenská republika* in October 1998. H?ka presented an analysis of the electoral failure of the HZDS in terms of the struggle for Slovakia between "patriotic" forces (the HZDS and its allies) and "external" forces (the opposition parties and independent non-governmental organizations). According to H?ka, "Slovak society clearly confirmed the leading position of the HZDS. However, in aggregate terms, public opinion turned against the forces of emancipation and, psychologically, brought Slovaks to their knees in the typical submissive position of subjects".¹⁶ This fascinating piece of phraseology, in which the HZDS ideologist took on the role of a national psychologist, is an excellent example of the discourse of nationalist populism in post-communist Slovakia. It was possible for H?ka to imagine the Slovak people, as if in an act of collective masochism, reverting from a state of "emancipation" and salvation to one of renewed "submission" and oppression. The new government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda was of course seen as the principal agent in helping to effect this. Some HZDS MP's openly denounced the government's new policies as the submission of Slovakia to "alien" (supposedly Western and Hungarian) interests.¹⁷

It would be wrong to think that the new governing coalition did not include any populist elements itself. Especially the left-wing coalition partner SDL occasionally displays strong populist and anti-Hungarian tendencies.¹⁸ Neither is this just a characteristic of certain SDL politicians. Indeed, in January 1999 an opinion poll showed that 59% of ethnic Slovaks disagreed with the inclusion of the party of the Hungarian minority into the new coalition government, and 58% of them with the government's decision to re-introduce bilingual school certificates in Hungarian-speaking areas, which had been abolished under the Meciar regime.¹⁹ Anti-Hungarian sentiment, deeply rooted in Slovak history and the ideological structure of Slovak nationalism, is a widespread phenomenon and goes hand in hand with distrust of the Hungarian minority concentrated in the southern part of the Slovak Republic bordering on Hungary. There is always the danger of the "Hungarian card", or a similar populist red herring, being used by one or another ambitious political figure, such as the young charismatic neo-populist politician R?ert Fico who left his old party the SDL in September 1999,

forming the following month the new party *Smer* ("Direction"). But with regard to the Hungarian minority question no political party, not even the HZDS, goes as far as the extremist SNS, whose leader Anna Malíková suggested in March 1999 that changes in the ethnic make-up of southern Slovakia might have to be made, hailing the policy of the Serbian government in Kosovo as an example.²⁰

R?ert Fico, meanwhile, set out on his way to becoming a populist leader even rivalling Meciar and a serious competitor of the SNS in exploiting another crucial issue of populist demagoguery: the Romani question. This sensitive "right-wing" agitation topic was added to Fico's original "left-wing" theme of the need for social protection of ordinary Slovaks against the Dzurinda government's painful socio-economic austerity programme. In January 2000, three months after the formation of his new party, Fico launched a policy proposal to the effect that Romanians who applied for political asylum abroad (a hot item) be cut off from receiving social benefits for a period of twelve months after their return to Slovakia. The response of the director of the Slovak Government Office of Human Rights and Minorities was to call Fico a "racist" and his proposal "ordinary populism" whose goal was to build support for *Smer*.²¹ One Slovak political analyst commented that Fico was a "charismatic populist who doesn't need to rely on a strong political programme to attract the support of a significant part of the Slovak population." Quite in Meciar-style, Fico was running his party as a "one man show".²² It is not surprising that the spectre of a new Meciar, one with a younger and a more modern face, began to haunt the minds of many who observe the Slovak political scene. It is not surprising either, that speculating about a possible co-operation between Meciar and Fico, notwithstanding the latter's denial having this intention, has become a standard item of the analysts' and political commentators' trade.

Fico's clever combination of the "social" and the "national" elements in his populist rhetoric was soon rewarded. An opinion poll in January 2000 showed that, with 14.3%, *Smer* had become the second most popular party in the country, trailing the HZDS which was supported by no less than 32.2%. A poll the following February brought even more astounding news: it showed that 27.2% of the respondents regarded Fico as the most trustworthy politician in Slovakia, with Meciar having to settle for the second place (22.6%). By March Fico had strengthened his leading position even more - 29% of 1,115 respondents named him as the most trustworthy public figure.²³ The rise of Fico seemed to confirm a statement made by the director of the Central European Romani Education and Opportunity Centre in Košice, who said that "Slovakia is a very good example of a country with people changing from left-oriented parties to nationalist, populist, extreme parties. *Smer* is equal to racism. It is a nationalist party which will isolate Slovakia ..."²⁴

In March 2000 the HZDS held another party convention, on which occasion some contradictory signals were given to the outside world. On the one hand,

the authoritarian and populist character of the party was reinforced rather than changed to fit a more democratic model. On the other hand some pro-Western, integration-oriented statements were made. The conference unanimously re-elected Meciar as HZDS chairman, there being no other candidates. A change to the party's statutes gave chairman Meciar the exclusive power to nominate its five vice-chairmen, who were indeed replaced in a heavy-handed manner, without any discussion. In keeping with the authoritarian atmosphere of the conference the HZDS's character as an ideologically-ambiguous "movement" founded on the charisma of one man remained the same, although Meciar claimed that the HZDS had been transformed into a normal, "slightly rightist" political party. That the HZDS was seen by outside observers as something rather different from a "normal" party was illustrated by one analyst who commented that it "can best be described as a rally party, drawing support from a variety of ideological positions, but even that classification is problematic".²⁵ Meciar rejected any suggestions - apparently made by a few cautiously critical party members - that he might leave as HZDS chairman in order to enable the party to pursue a new, pro-Western policy. "Why should the HZDS get rid of a leader who was successful four times in elections, who three times led a government and who basically built this state?", he declared. But at the convention Meciar also said that a Western orientation was the only way possible for Slovakia. He even apologized for foreign policy "mistakes" made by the 1994-8 government, in particular with regard to the United States. The former U.S. ambassador to Slovakia Theodore Russell said in response that he "would exercise caution" in coming to conclusions as to whether this new pro-Western stance was genuine.²⁶

The HZDS managed to maintain its position as the most popular political party in Slovakia. Most polls taken over the course of 2000 showed that about 30% of Slovak voters, or at least 25-30%, supported the HZDS, while by May 2000 Fico's *Smer* had consolidated a very strong second place, being supported by 23% of respondents. Perhaps at least as important was the fact that in the same month it was also confirmed that Fico himself, only 35 years old, maintained his position as the most popular politician in the country.²⁷ An editorial in the *Slovak Spectator*, Slovakia's independent English-language newspaper, observed eighteen months after the Dzurinda government had taken over from Meciar that "most Slovak voters ... are not so resolutely anti-Meciar. Many have all but forgotten the kleptomania and oppression of civil society that occurred under Meciar, and have become disillusioned with the rule-bending and clientelism which seems to have continued under Dzurinda".²⁸ Under these circumstances it was only President Schuster who could compete in the opinion polls with the two populist opposition politicians. Fico maintained his position as the most trusted public figure up to the end of the year, with Meciar remaining in a strong second place.²⁹ No doubt another initiative by Fico in addressing the Romani issue played a part in helping him to keep his status of almost unrivalled popularity. On 9 June 2000, Fico proposed that social benefits be cut for Romani families with more than three children. At a press conference he explained that the demographic trend was a "time bomb" they had to keep

under control. He claimed that in ten years the number of Roma in East Slovakia could match the majority population and that according to a prognosis he had, in 2010 there would be 1.2 million Roma in Slovakia and at least 800,000 on social benefits. (By 1999 the number of Roma in Slovakia was estimated at between 420,000 and 500,000, which is 8-9% of the total population.)³⁰ Fico also declared that the state had avoided solving the Romani problem and that the authorities often leave violations of the law by Roma unpunished.³¹

This playing on the prospect of an impending demographic nightmare caused by the accelerating growth of the Romani population is obviously a powerful weapon in the arsenal of populist demagogy. Another weapon is the allegation that the present government makes too many concessions to the Hungarian minority which is represented by its own political party in the ruling coalition. Ever since the formation of the governing four-party coalition the three ethnic Slovak parties have been apprehensive of this kind of accusation and have, therefore, refused to make any really substantial concessions to their Hungarian coalition partner.³² This has led to great dissatisfaction on the part of the Hungarian minority party SMK. One of the measures of political reform that the SMK wants to see implemented is a change to the preamble of the Slovak Constitution from 1992 which proclaims the ethnic Slovak nation to be the principal state-building subject. This, along with other constitutional changes that could be interpreted as weakening the ethnic-Slovak foundation of the Slovak Republic, the Dzurinda government has thus far failed to carry into effect. Experts on the topic believe that the three Slovak coalition parties may fear losing support among nationalist Slovak voters if such (ideologically and psychologically highly sensitive) changes were made.³³

A major activity of the HZDS during 2000 was a protracted campaign for the holding of a referendum on the demand for early elections. The argument was that the Dzurinda government was making a mess of the Slovak economy, with the people suffering from rising unemployment and an ever falling standard of living, and was therefore betraying the Slovak national interest. Slovakia should not wait until September 2002, but a new general election should be held as quickly as possible to give the Slovak people the opportunity to redress the situation. In this propaganda effort the HZDS was supported by the SNS as well as Fico's *Smer*. Supporters of the three parties succeeded in collecting the number of signatures required for the holding of a referendum. In September President Schuster announced that the referendum would be held on 11 November, 2000. The kind of sentiments prevailing among the nationalist-populist rank and file was expressed by a Meciar supporter at a HZDS rally in the heavily nationalist town of Žilina on the eve of the referendum. He was reported as saying: "They [the government] only bow to the West, but you, Mr. Meciar, you go your own way and never fall to your knees".³⁴ Nevertheless, to the surprise of many observers and participants, the referendum became a fiasco as only 20% of potential voters showed up at the polling stations, falling far short of the required 50% to make the referendum valid. Jozef Božik, HZDS vice-chairman for media, claimed that employers and the government had intimidated their employees to prevent them from casting their vote. But,

interestingly enough, he also said - more or less repeating Meciar's words of October 1998 - that the HZDS was disappointed in Slovakia's citizens and that those who failed to vote could no longer expect the party to "save" them.³⁵ Here the citizens had another piece of the populist rhetoric of salvation and betrayal, showing that the political psychology of nationalist populism was well and alive. But what about the ultimate failure of the populist referendum campaign?

6

The failure of the November referendum initiated by the HZDS seems to have caused a certain euphoria in anti-Meciar circles. A political analyst like Sona Szomol?yi, for example, was quick to conclude that "Meciar's influence is disappearing", not only pointing to the referendum fiasco but to the fact that by the latter half of 2000 preference polls seemed to show a gradual decrease in support for Meciar. A poll taken in November showed that 22.3% of respondents regarded Meciar as the most trustworthy politician in the country, keeping him in second position behind the ever popular Fico. Indeed, Szomol?yi and others are aware that Meciar, seen by many as the "Father of Slovakia", may stage a return through co-operation with Fico.³⁶ The failure of the referendum should not be interpreted as an expression of support for the government, whose major representatives are far less popular than either Meciar or Fico. The low turn-out in the referendum was rather the result of a general feeling of malaise, indifference and apathy, and of the political passivity that often characterizes the Slovak people. Obviously the referendum campaign was not the most effective way for the HZDS and the other populist parties to mobilize their supporters. However, to conclude from this that the support base for populist politics is disintegrating might be a serious mistake. In this connection it is often argued that since the proportion of young voters supporting the HZDS is relatively low, Meciar's party is, as it were, gradually dying off as time progresses. Research in January 1999 showed that the HZDS was the party with the oldest electorate, with only 21% of HZDS voters being under thirty-five. But a party like the SNS had a relatively young electorate, with 31% of their supporters being in this age group.³⁷ Moreover, Fico's party is evidently very popular among young Slovaks, probably the most popular of all. If Fico's rise were consolidated and translated into real political power it would mean that the Slovak populist tradition successfully reproduced itself by assuming a more modern, young, quasi-acceptable face.

At the beginning of November 2000, a few days even before the referendum, Ivan Mikloš, Slovakia's excellent Deputy Prime Minister for Economy, said in an optimistic mood that "people these days understand ... the inutility of easy populist solutions ... They've already had enough experience of populists and magical solutions to serious problems. The public has simply matured, it's that simple".³⁸ This positive belief may be defined as the "democratic-evolutionist" perspective, and all those who hope for a successful

process of democratic consolidation in "transformation societies" like Slovakia would like to subscribe to it. But precisely how optimistic is one entitled to be? Brigita Schm?nerová, the equally first-class Finance Minister, said in an interview with the *Slovak Spectator* one day after Mikloš had made his statement that the Slovak electorate may have learned a lesson in the 1998 election campaign, but the major question was if they would remember it in the next general election in 2002. "Some people still believe there is always some saviour who can solve everything easily", she said. "This gives me concern for the next election campaign - some people want to be deceived, they don't want to hear the truth".³⁹ SDL member Schm?nerová not only proved to be more cautious and sceptical than the centre-right liberal Mikloš but, belonging to a party that is itself susceptible to populism, she may have a greater understanding of the populist mind. In an interview with the Slovak newspaper *Pravda* on 18 December 2000, she said that her own party SDL was "going backwards". She explained that "voices within the SDL which have turned their back on the transformation process, or which favour populist style leftist politics, are growing stronger".⁴⁰

In November 2000 a young Slovak woman wrote a letter to the *Slovak Spectator* saying that young people in Slovakia learn racist attitudes from their parents. She was "doubtful as to whether this country will ever get rid of its deeply rooted xenophobia and fascism".⁴¹ This was perhaps a rather extreme, pessimistic statement. But it reminds us how radical nationalism, isolationism and authoritarianism, some of the ingredients of the populist mind, can be reproduced as well as diluted by unpredictable social and political developments. In this regard, however, Slovakia is probably not an exceptional case.

Endnotes

1. Soňa Szomol?yi, "Old Elites in the New Slovak State and Their Current Transformations", in Soňa Szomol?yi and Grigorij Mesežnikov (eds), *The Slovak Path of Transition - To Democracy?* (Bratislava, 1994), 73.
2. Mari? Leško, *Meciar a meciarizmus. Politik bez škrupúl, politika bez z?ran* (Bratislava, 1996), 171-233.
3. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London, 1969), "Introduction", 3-4.
4. Cf. Thomas E. Fischer, "Der slowakische Sonderweg. Zur Geschichtskultur in einer Transformationsgesellschaft", *Ethnos-Nation*, 6 / 1-2 (1998), 152-4.

5. Compare, for example, Christian Boulanger, "Constitutionalism in East Central Europe? The Case of Slovakia Under Meciar", *East European Quarterly*, XXXIII / 1 (March 1999).
6. See Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Nationalism, Populism, and Other Threats to Liberal Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (Seattle, 1999), 27-8.
7. Cf. Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival* (New York, 1996) - an example of the survival concept in historiography.
8. "Exclusive interview" with Meciar by *The Slovak Spectator* (TSS), reported in the issue of December 6-12, 1999.
9. Quoted in Grigorij Mesežnikov, "Domestic Politics", in Grigorij Mesežnikov, Michal Ivantyšin, and Tom Nicholson (eds), *Slovakia 1998-1999: A Global Report on the State of Society* (Bratislava, 1999), 57-8.
10. Cf. the essays of Donald MacRae, "Populism as an Ideology", Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine", and Angus Stewart, "The Social Roots", in Ionescu and Gellner (eds), *Populism*. See also Tismaneanu, *Nationalism, Populism*.
11. Miroslav Koll?, section on churches in Mesežnikov, "Domestic Politics", 37-8.
12. Vladimír Krivý, "Election Results 1998-1999", in Mesežnikov et al. (eds), *Slovakia 1998-1999*, 66-8.
13. Krivý, "Election Results", 77-9; Zora B?orová, Olga Gy?fášová, and Mari? Velšic, "Public Opinion", in Mesežnikov et al. (eds), *Slovakia 1998-1999*, 147, 161-2.
14. Krivý, "Election Results."
15. Mesežnikov, "Domestic Politics", 13.
16. Ibid., 59.
17. Ibid., 60.
18. Pieter van Duin and Zuzana Polácková, "Democratic renewal and the Hungarian minority question in Slovakia. From populism to ethnic democracy?", *European Societies*, 2 / 3 (2000), 351-3.
19. B?orová et al., "Public Opinion", 157.
20. Mesežnikov, "Domestic Politics", 61-2.
21. TSS, January 17-23, 2000; January 24-30, 2000.
22. Luboš Kubín, quoted in TSS, January 31-February 6, 2000.
23. TSS, February 14-20, 2000; March 6-12, 2000; March 27-April 2, 2000.
24. Quoted in TSS, February 7-13, 2000.
25. Timothy Houghton of Bratislava's Comenius University, quoted in TSS, March 27-April 2, 2000.
26. Ibid.
27. TSS, April 17-23, 2000; May 15-21, 2000; May 22-28, 2000.
28. TSS, April 10-16, 2000.
29. TSS, September 25-October 1, 2000; November 27-December 3, 2000.
30. Michal Vašecka, "The Roma", in Mesežnikov et al. (eds), *Slovakia 1998-1999*, 395-6.
31. TSS, June 19-25, 2000.
32. Van Duin and Polácková, "Democratic renewal and the Hungarian minority

question", 348 ff.

33. TSS, October 9-15, 2000. See also the analysis made in van Duin and Polácková, "Democratic renewal and the Hungarian minority question."

34. TSS, November 13-19, 2000.

35. TSS, November 20-26, 2000.

36. TSS, November 27-December 3, 2000.

37. Břorová et al., "Public Opinion", 147.

38. Quoted in TSS, November 13-19, 2000.

39. Ibid.

40. Quoted in TSS, December 25, 2000-January 7, 2001.

41. TSS, November 20-26, 2000.