

SLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY – THE MOST COMPLICATED BILATERAL RELATIONS IN CENTRAL EUROPE – FOCUSING ON THE GABČÍKOVO-NAGYMAROS PROBLEM

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It is undeniable that after the collapse of the socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, the bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary, which had been apparently calm during the previous forty years, again turned into a grave international issue. Especially after the formation of the independent Slovak Republic on January 1, 1993, Slovak-Hungarian relations became sharper and more direct in character, to become the most complicated bilateral relations in Central Europe.

According to related monographs and articles, Slovak-Hungarian relations mainly consist of two aspects. One aspect is composed of various contemporary issues in connection with the Hungarian minority's rights in Slovakia (e.g. the controversies about the official language law in 1990, the law on first name and surname in 1993, the law on traffic signs in 1994, the state language law in 1995 etc.). Another aspect relates to the huge water management system on the Danube, well known as the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project. The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the historical development of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros problem and thus to make clear the complicated structure of Slovak-Hungarian relations.

Historical background

The history of river improvement on the middle Danube dates back to the medieval period. It was in the seventeenth century that works for the protection of the banks were started systematically. Since then, joining and reinforcing work on the embankments has been carried out and dredging operations have been performed continuously to make ship navigation smoother. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the waterway of the middle Danube had been regulated to the shape as we see it today. However, even such work was not complete enough to prevent floods. In 1876, 1897, 1899, 1954, and 1965, the Danube overflowed its banks. As a result

of the last flood of 1965, more than 100 thousand hectares of land came under water in southern Slovakia, and many villages were destroyed.

After the Second World War, on August 18, 1948, the Convention Concerning the Regime of Navigation on the Danube was signed in Belgrade by seven then socialist countries (the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Hungary, Rumania, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia). According to the preamble of the convention, its purpose was “to guarantee free navigation on the Danube river, in agreement with the interests and sovereignty of the Danubian countries, and to make closer the economic and cultural relations between the Danubian and other countries”.

It was symptomatic that the second document attached to the convention was entitled “On the Gabčíkovo-Gönyű Area”. The document said that “on the necessity of construction which is expected to guarantee the normal condition of navigation in the Gabčíkovo-Gönyű area (from 1821 km to 1791 km), the signatories agree to recognize that it conforms to their general interests to keep this area in good navigable condition, and they also agree to recognize that the necessary construction for this purpose is far beyond the power of the concerned countries along the river, to whom they have the competence to entrust the construction legally”.

As one of the several drastic measures to control such unstable river conditions, a plan was formulated in Hungary, as early as the beginning of 1940s, to build a comprehensive water management system in northern Hungary. Based on this idea, a project for the construction of a big system with a power canal was studied in the 1950s as a joint undertaking between the socialist countries of Czechoslovakia and Hungary.¹ “From the early 1960s, survey, research, and comparative and feasibility studies were started for the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Hydroelectric System.”²

The project took concrete form in 1970s. Preparation works for the construction were started in 1976. On September 16, 1977, the Treaty on the Construction and Operation of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Barrage System was signed in Budapest by the Czechoslovak and Hungarian prime ministers.

According to the treaty, this large-scale project originally consisted of two parts. The first (the Gabčíkovo part), which is located mainly in Slovak territory, was composed of the Hrušov-Dunakiliti reservoir, a weir at Dunakiliti, a 25-km-long power canal, the Gabčíkovo dam with a hydroelectric power station and two shiplocks, and deepening of the river bed for 20 km. The second (the Nagymaros part), which is situated in Hungarian territory, included flood-protection measures, the Nagymaros dam with a hydroelectric power station and ship locks, and deepening of the river bed for 40 km.

¹ The description of this part is based on an interview with a Hungarian scholar, Emil MOSONYI, *Kto sa bojí objektívneho vedeckého názoru?* [Who fears objective scientific opinion?], *Národná obroda*, Bratislava, 28 February 1994.

² *Danubius Magnus /Gabčíkovo/*. Bratislava 1993.

The major goals of the construction were:

- (a) to improve the conditions of navigation by constructing a power canal;
- (b) to provide for flood protection by constructing a reservoir for water coordinations; and
- (c) to obtain electric energy by constructing hydroelectric power stations.

On the basis of the treaty, the Czechoslovak side was obligated to construct a great complex at the village Gabčíkovo³ in southern Slovakia, and the Hungarian side was to construct a corresponding work near Nagymaros in the northern part of Hungary. In 1981, the Hungarian side suspended its share of the work due to financial difficulty, but construction on Czechoslovak territory proceeded as planned.

Politicization of the construction work

From the mid 1980s, the project became a target for intense criticism by ecology groups in both countries and was characterized as a “megalomaniac product which is sure to bring an environmental catastrophe”. They made the project a target of indirect criticism against the socialist regime. It is significant for the later developments of this issue (especially for Hungary), that the construction work was first politicized by dissident groups against the regime.

Environmental groups developed a campaign mainly against the ecological destruction that was believed to be associated with this project. In Hungary, the activities of the Danube Circle movement were supported by a wide range of social groups, and the environmental organization played an important role in stopping the Hungarian part of the construction works in 1980.

In Slovakia, ecological movements were also organized, though they operated with less intensity. An example of one of the activities of this kind was published in 1987 as the brochure Bratislava/nahlas [Bratislava/aloud] by the ecology group The Slovak Union of the Protectors of Nature and Country. In this brochure, they calmly pointed out that “the influence of future Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros works on the quality of the ground water may pose a threat especially for the water sources of Rusovce, Ostrovné Lúčky and Mokrad (all Slovak villages)”.⁴

After the collapse of the socialist regimes in 1989, there were different attitudes adopted toward dealing with this project by the Hungarian and the Czechoslovak governments. In Hungary, the government decided on May 13, 1989, still before

³ Gabčíkovo is a village in the district of Dunajská Streda in southern Slovakia. It had the historical Hungarian name of Bös. In 1948, the village was renamed Gabčíkovo after a Slovak hero of the resistance movement during the Second World War, Jozef Gabčík (1912-1942). According to the national census of 1991, the village has 4,910 inhabitants, and of these 4,629 (94%) belong to the Hungarian ethnic group and 237 (6%) are Slovaks.

⁴ *Bratislava/nahlas*. Bratislava 1987, p. 7. About the activities of the Slovak Union of the Protectors of Nature and Country (Slovenský zväz ochrancov prírody a krajiny) during the 1980's, which concern the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project, see the brochure *Dunaj story*. Bratislava 1990.

the change of government from one monopolized by communists to a pluralist one, without previous consultation with the Czechoslovak side, to suspend construction at Nagymaros in their territory for two months on account of ecological destruction. Moreover, on July 20, they also decided to stop construction of their share of the Gabčíkovo part of the project (the weir at Dunakiliti). On October 31, the Hungarian parliament decided to suspend construction at Nagymaros, and parliament empowered the government to negotiate a change in the treaty of 1977.

The Czechoslovak side (especially the Slovak side), on the contrary, even after the dramatic changes in the political landscape at the end of 1989, insisted on continuing construction at Gabčíkovo, mainly based on the fact that over 90% of the construction had been completed prior to the collapse of the socialist regime (in comparison to Nagymaros where only 10% of the construction was completed).

Realization of a temporary solution

There were several rounds of negotiations between the new, post-socialist governments of both countries on the issue, but they were unable to reach a compromise. On April 10, 1991, the Hungarian parliament empowered the governmental delegation to negotiate only over the abrogation of the treaty of 1977 and for restoration of the original state of the terrain. On July 23, the Slovak government (after two days also the Czechoslovak federal government) approved the realization of a temporary solution (so-called alternative C), and, on November 18, work was started. They intended to put the Gabčíkovo works into operation by constructing a structure which would reduce the area of the reservoir by one-third and by extending the power canal in Slovak territory. Instead of a weir at Dunakiliti, which the Hungarians abandoned, the old river bed of the Danube would be dammed at Čunovo, where both sides of the river belong to the Slovak Republic.

A brochure which propagates the standpoint of the Slovak construction company explains the reason for choosing the provisional solution, emphasizing economic motivation, as follows: "If there were no technical possibility of putting Gabčíkovo into operation (...), the Slovak economy would receive another heavy shock, and the shock would be multiplied by the synergetic effects of the conversion from military oriented industry, the effects of privatization, and the transformation to a free market economy."⁵ Meanwhile, one foreign observer pointed out the political and psychological aspects of the issue for Slovakia: "The main motivation for the speedy completion of the Gabčíkovo dam system seems to be political – that is, a matter of national independence and pride. The project has become synonymous with a demonstration of Slovak strength, will, and decisiveness."⁶

⁵ *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project. Standpoint of the Czecho-Slovak side and answers to questions.* Vodohospodárska výstavba Bratislava, 1992, p. 6.

⁶ OKOLICSÁNYI, K.: *Slovak-Hungarian Tension: Bratislava Diverts the Danube.* RFE/RL Research Report, 1992, no. 49, p. 52.

Rudolf Chmel, Czechoslovak Ambassador to Hungary at that time, in September 1991, in a conference in Budapest, emphasizing the complicated psychological aspect, pointed out as follows: “The national and ethnic squeamishness of Slovaks and Hungarians, their feelings of unfair treatment and historical trauma so determine, but especially deform our relations from both sides. Even in such apparently only technocratic issues, such as the construction of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project, which some politicians are trying to utilize for stimulation of ethnic emotions (...)”⁷

Against the measures taken by the Slovaks, on May 19, 1992, the Hungarian government announced its decision to annul the treaty of 1977. The above-mentioned observer says that “the main argument for the annulment was that the Gabčíkovo dam system, if finished according to present plans, would cause irreversible environmental damage to the River Danube and to the surrounding region”.⁸

In spite of such fear, at the end of October 1992, the Slovaks, on the basis of the provisional solution, were forced to dam up the old river bed. As a result, 90-95% of the water of the Danube started to flow into the newly-built power canal. Soon after damming up the old course of the Danube, the hydroelectric power station at Gabčíkovo was put into operation, and ship navigation through the power canal was started. According to the observer, “Hungary had in fact suffered a major foreign policy defeat, since its efforts to prevent the diversion had failed”.⁹

Points in dispute

As we saw above, the dispute about the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros works has deviated from the original dimension (precedence to river improvement of the Danube against the priority of protecting the natural environment). It has been transformed into a political issue, in which there is complicated intertwining of political and diplomatic intensions concerning national prestige and interest and distorted nationalism in both countries. The issue is further complicated by the fact that a mainly Hungarian minority lives in the greater part of the area in the Slovak territory on which the Gabčíkovo project may have direct influence.

The arguments of a Hungarian ecologist outline the major problems which might be involved in the project:

(a) Geological risks. – Advanced geological surveys of the fault lines under the Gabčíkovo reservoir were not sufficient. The anti-earthquake procedures used are not up to international standards. The existence of a very dangerous stratum under

⁷ CHMEL, R.: “Nerozumieme si” alebo O potrebe vzájomnej vnímavosti (aj Slovákov a Maďarov) [“We do not understand each other” or On the necessity of mutual perception (of Slovaks and Hungarians)]. *Slovensko-maďarské vzťahy v 20. storočí* [Slovak-Hungarian relations in the 20th century]. Bratislava 1992, p. 10.

⁸ OKOLICSÁNYI, K.: *Hungary Cancels Treaty on Danube Dam Construction*. RFE/RL Research Report, 1992, no. 26, p. 46.

⁹ OKOLICSÁNYI, K.: op. cit., 1992, no. 49, p. 54.

the reservoir is also confirmed. We are able to prognosticate in advance about the danger of a collapse of the dam and corresponding flood.

(b) Threat to drinking water. – There are some possibilities that the operation of the system may destroy the infiltration function of the old river bed. Therefore, contaminated mud will accumulate, and it could pollute important sources of drinking water in Slovakia and also in Hungary.

(c) Destruction of river ecosystems. – Ground water levels may sink because of the lowering of the quantity of water in the old river bed, and the rich wooded flood plain (especially the inland delta area around Szigetköz in northwestern Hungary) may die from lack of water. Therefore, valuable flora and fauna may be endangered.

These kind of “ecological risks are partly demonstrated and partly deduced from similar precedents at home and abroad. In short, we can give advance notice of the dangers. Until now, the Czechoslovaks have not brought forward any evidence which argues that these serious dangers may be brought down under acceptable limits”.¹⁰

On the other hand, Július Binder, the chief director of the Slovak construction company, which is responsible for the construction works at Gabčíkovo, persisted in his opinion, by using a metaphor: “You are making a mistake, if you think that the Danube as it stands is in an ideal condition. The river is sick. She needs medical treatment. The works are a medicine for the problems.” Binder pointed out the followings as arguments for the necessity of the project:

(a) To prevent the lowering of the river bed. – Because of the outflow of sand and gravel, the river bed of the Danube in nearby Bratislava is deeply scooped out. Therefore, the ground water level is steadily sinking, and the rich wooded flood plain is becoming dry. Conditions for agriculture are getting worse. If regulation of the water level by the creation of the reservoir is implemented, we will be able to stop this phenomenon.

(b) To improve the operational ability of the river port in Bratislava. – Owing to the lowering of the water level on the Danube, the port is out of use for 200 days in a year, which causes a great loss to the Slovak economy. If regulation of the water level is achieved, we can improve the operational ability of the port.

(c) To facilitate water transport. – The sector between Gabčíkovo and Nagymaros forms a bottleneck in the river transportation system of the middle Danube. If the power canal is opened, we will be able to smooth out transportation bottlenecks.

Binder’s arguments are backed up by so-called realistic thinking which presupposes existing facts. He says that it would cost more to abandon construction than

¹⁰ See SZABÓ, G.: *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros: maďarský pohľad* [the Hungarian point of view]. Listy, Praha 1992, no. 5, pp. 25-28.

to finish it. To use his words, returning the terrain to its original state (which the Hungarian side advocates) is out of the question.¹¹

Appeal to the International Court of Justice

Upon dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and following the formation of the Slovak Republic on January 1, 1993, Slovakia succeeded to the rights and obligations relating to the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project in all aspects. Thence, the dispute over the Danube brought further complications into the already complicated bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary. At the same time, both governments always have to take into consideration the fact that “further escalation of the conflict will harm their chances of joining the EC in future”.¹²

To solve the dispute rationally, both governments agreed to negotiations in a tripartite meeting (including representatives of the European Community) in Brussels and came to the conclusion that the dispute should be presented to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. On April 7, 1993, the Special Agreement for Submission to the International Court of Justice on the Differences between the Republic of Hungary and the Slovak Republic Concerning the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Project was signed in Brussels.

In the preamble of the agreement, which consists of six articles, both countries officially recognize that “the Parties concerned have been unable to settle these differences by negotiations” and desire that “these differences should be settled by the International Court of Justice”.

In the agreement, the following three questions are presented:

(a) “Whether the Republic of Hungary was entitled to suspend and subsequently abandon, in 1989, the works on the Nagymaros Project and on part of the Gabčíkovo Project (...)”

(b) “Whether the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic was entitled to proceed, in November 1991, to the “provisional solution” and to put this system into operation beginning in October 1992 (...)”

(c) “What are the legal effects of the notification, on May 19, 1992, of the termination of the Treaty (of 1977) by the Republic of Hungary.” (Article 2 (1))

Further, both countries “agree that, pending the final Judgement of the Court, they will establish and implement a temporary water management regime for the Danube”. (Article 4 (1)) The agreement came into force on June 28, 1993 by the exchange of instruments of ratification.¹³

¹¹ See BINDER, J.: *Gabčíkovské anomálie. Na domnienky odporcov vodného diela máme argumenty* [Anomalies of Gabčíkovo. We have arguments about the conjectures of opponents of the project]. *Slobodný piatok*, Bratislava, 21 August 1992.

¹² OKOLICSÁNYI, K.: *op. cit.*, 1992, no. 49, p. 49.

¹³ *Zbierka zákonov Slovenskej republiky* [Collected acts of the Slovak Republic], Bratislava, no. 15, 1994, p. 323.

It will probably take several years for the International Court of Justice to make a ruling. According to a Slovak newspaper, the lawsuit on the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros system will be brought to oral proceedings by the International Court of Justice in the first quarter of 1997. In that case it is possible to assume that the judgement may be passed during the summer of 1997.¹⁴

Trend of public opinion in Slovakia

The majority of citizens in the Slovak Republic say that it is realistic to operate the Gabčíkovo project, since, prior to 1989, the construction works were nearly finished. According to a public opinion poll which was carried out in March 1993 by the liberal institution, the Centre for Social Analyses in Bratislava, answers to the question, "The dispute about the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros project ought to be decided by the International Court of Justice in The Hague. What do you think about this?" were as follows:

	All citizens %	Slovaks %	Hungarians %
The work must be implemented to a full extent without regard to the International Court of Justice	54	60	14
It is necessary to subordinate to the judgement of the International Court of Justice	28	25	56
The construction must be definitely stopped	2	1	10
Other answers. No opinion	16	14	20

As the figures indicate, the opinions of the citizens in Slovakia about the Gabčíkovo project are not united. A little over half of the population as a whole (54%) supports operation of the project without regard to the judgement of the International Court of Justice. It is symptomatic that the approval rating for this item among Slovak citizens amounts to 60%, while the rate of approval among ethnic Hungarians measures only 14%.

On the other hand, 28% of the whole population of the Slovak Republic, and a quarter of the Slovak citizens, insists that their government should obey the judgement of the International Court. As concerns the citizens who are ethnic Hungar-

¹⁴ *Gabčíkovo bude v Haagu vraj o rok* [Gabčíkovo may reach The Hague in a year]. *Národná obroda*, Bratislava, 9 February 1996.

ians, the majority (56%) supports this opinion. An extreme viewpoint (to stop the construction definitely) is supported by just 2% of the entire citizenry, but the rate among ethnic Hungarians reaches 10%.¹⁵

As mentioned above, the dispute about the Gabčíkovo project has brought a quarrel not only into bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary but also into internal relations between citizens of the Slovak and Hungarian ethnicities in Slovakia.

Report of the international monitoring group

Since the start of operation at the end of October 1992 the Gabčíkovo system seems to be working smoothly. Soon after the start, monitoring activities were begun by the international working group of the Commission of the European Community. The working group consists of six independent experts, whose duty is to conduct a follow-up survey about the influence of the project on the natural environment and to propose several alternatives to the provisional water transport system.

According to a monitoring report, "Determination of influences of the Gabčíkovo project and recommendations for improvement of the monitoring system", which was published by the working group on November 2, 1993 in Budapest, the main influences of the Gabčíkovo project on the natural environment after one year of operation are:

(a) In comparison with conditions before damming (at the end of October 1992), the water level in Bratislava was increased by 1-2 m, which is equal to the conditions of 40 years earlier.

(b) On some parameters, no substantial changes were ascertained regarding the quality of the surface water.

(c) There is only a little information, which allows us to pronounce only preliminary and indefinite conclusions, about the influence of the Gabčíkovo project on sedimentation and erosion (in the river bed).

(d) The ground water level in Slovak territory has increased or remained without change. The rising level has occurred mainly in the upper part (of the Danube) near the reservoir. This means that the change happened in the part of the territory most negatively influenced by a long term trend of lower ground water levels. (...) It seems that ground water levels in Hungary were also increased in areas not far from the reservoir. In the middle part of Szigetköz, between Dunakiliti and Ásványráró (both Hungarian villages), ground water levels have sunk in the territory near the river.

¹⁵ *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska po rozpade ČSFR. Marec 1993 (Správa zo sociologického výskumu)*, Centrum pre sociálnu analýzu [Current Problems of Slovakia after the Split of the ČSFR. March 1993. (Report of the Sociological Survey), Centre for Social Analysis], Bratislava 1993, p. 85.

(e) Generally speaking, no change was ascertained in the quality of the ground water after the damming of the Danube.

(f) Due to the risk of ground water levels after the damming up in the greater part of the Slovak territory, conditions (for agriculture) changed for the better. By some estimates, the demand for irrigation from external sources was brought down about 25% in comparison with conditions before the damming.

(g) As a result of the changes in ground water level, forests were positively influenced in Slovakia and negatively in Hungary.

(h) In 1993, the hydroelectric power station at Gabčíkovo produced 150-200 GWh of electric power monthly. This is equal to 10% of the whole consumption of electric energy in Slovakia. (The power station began to operate permanently on May 17, 1996.)

(i) The international navigation of ships through the ship locks at Gabčíkovo has functioned normally since the opening on November 9, 1992.¹⁶

Accidents at the Gabčíkovo site

Judging from the contents, the monitoring report of the international working group comes to conclusions which are advantageous to the Slovaks (except (d) and (g)). Nearly the entire Slovak mass media was taking the line that the so-called “catastrophic scenario” of the Hungarians has become bankrupt.

But in the first quarter of 1994, two serious accidents happened in succession at the Gabčíkovo site. First, on February 11, the Ukrainian lighter Zernograd, loaded with crude oil (about 80 thousand litres), went aground and sank in one of the two lock chambers. A lot of oil flowed from the wreck. It is said that the captain of the lighter (killed in the accident) should be held accountable for this accident. The disposal of the released oil and the removal of the sunken structure of the lighter took a long time, and during this time the works of the lock chambers were closed.

Moreover, on March 20, one of the concrete doors (500 tons in weight) of the other lock chamber was crushed by water pressure. Water in the chamber flowed out rapidly, and a tsunami-like wave about 4 m high was released. Newspapers reported that the quality of the material comprising the broken door was questionable. The accident also may have been caused by the pressure of water which had collected for a long time in the other lock chamber during the removal work of the sunken lighter. Though ships in the lock were not directly damaged, both ship locks became unusable. Shipping through Gabčíkovo was stopped indefinitely. (Navigation through the new doors of the left lock chamber was begun on January 19, 1995.)

¹⁶ The description of this part is based on the article *Zistenia expertov Európskej únie* [Ascertainments by experts of the European Union]. Národná obroda, Bratislava, 21 February 1994.

These accidents (especially the second one) shook the public confidence of Slovak society in the safety of the Gabčíkovo works. Taking advantage of these accidents, the Hungarians demanded that water should be returned to the old river bed in order to use it again as an international navigation course. But the Slovaks refused this demand.

The bilateral treaty and Gabčíkovo

As an important step toward historical reconciliation, on March 19, 1995, the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Co-operation between the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Hungary, consisting of 22 articles, was signed in Paris by the prime ministers of both countries. After hot discussions which had continued for more than a year, the treaty was finally ratified by the Slovak parliament on March 26, 1996. In the preamble of the treaty, both countries are convinced, that “the historical changes which have taken place in Europe and also in their own countries offer unique possibilities for the solution of common problems, following from the development of bilateral relations, in the spirit of good neighbourliness and friendly co-operation”.

In the 3rd article of the treaty both sides confirm that they respect nonaggression of the common boundary between their countries, and reciprocal territorial integrity. They also confirm that they have no territorial claims on each other and have no intention of raising any in the future. This article is significant especially for the Slovak side, for whom the possible repetition of the historical experience of November 1938 (the revision of the southern boundary in favour of Hungary by the Vienna Arbitration) always remains as a trauma. The article must work for them as a kind of tranquilizer.

On the other hand, the Hungarian side (including the Hungarian minority in Slovakia) may positively estimate the 15th article of the treaty, where the protection of national minorities and of their rights and freedoms is determined in detail. It is important that both countries agree to exercise the standards and political pledges anchored in the international documents, such as: 1. the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (November 1994), 2. the Document of the Copenhagen Meeting on the Human Dimension of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (June 29, 1990), 3. the Declaration of the General Assembly of the United Nations no. 47/135 on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (December 18, 1992), 4. the Recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe no. 1201 (1993) to Respect Individual Human and Civil Rights Including the Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Zmluva o dobrom susedstve a priateľskej spolupráci medzi Slovenskou republikou a Maďarskou republikou* [The Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Co-operation between the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Hungary]. Národná obroda, Bratislava, 27 March 1996.

According to a public opinion poll which was carried out in April-May 1995 by the Institution for Research of Public Opinion at the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava, the spectrum of opinions about the signature of the bilateral treaty between Slovakia and Hungary was as follows:

	All citizens %	Slovaks %	Hungarians %
Fully approve the treaty	26	23	40
Mostly approve the treaty	29	31	21
Mostly do not approve the treaty	4	4	5
Do not approve the treaty at all	4	4	3
No interest	24	24	21
No opinion	13	14	10

As the figures indicate, 55% (26%+29%) of the whole population of the Slovak Republic, in greater or lesser degrees, supports the treaty. It is remarkable that the rate of approval among ethnic Hungarians (61%) is a little higher than among Slovaks (54%). There are relatively few citizens who do not approve the treaty (8%), but at the same time it should not go unheeded that almost a quarter of all citizens of Slovakia (24%) have no interest in the issue. It is interesting from our point of view, that in the seventh place on the list enumerating the positive aspects of the treaty, we read the sentence: The treaty is useful for solution of the issues concerned with the Gabčíkovo project.¹⁸

On the whole we should positively estimate the meaning of this bilateral treaty as an attempt to solve the issues arising from the complicated Slovak-Hungarian relations by peaceful legal means. The treaty is the result of negotiations and compromise in a positive sense. It is also an attempt to heal the historical traumas on both sides.

Instead of a conclusion

An analysis of the historical development of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros problem indicates that the roots of this complex situation consists undoubtedly in the politicization of an originally unpolitical problem. What has made the issue all the more complicated is that the construction work on Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros was first politicized by dissident groups during the socialist regimes (especially in Hungary). The term Nagymaros there became a symbol of the disaster which the socialist regime had brought to their country.

¹⁸ *Názory, Informačný bulletin*, Ústav pre výskum verejnej mienky pri Štatistickom úrade Slovenskej republiky [Opinions, Information bulletin, Institution for Research of Public Opinion at the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic], 1995, no. 2, pp. 26-28.

In Slovakia, however, soon after the collapse of the socialist regimes the name Gabčíkovo began to symbolize the national pride and prestige of the Slovaks. The difference in the strength of aversion to the memory of the socialist period in both countries originates in their different historical circumstances. Of course an important role was also played by the fact that by 1989 over 90% of the construction of the Gabčíkovo part had been completed, while only 10% of the Nagymaros part was completed. These psychological factors prevented both Slovaks and Hungarians from having a calm dialogue on this theme.

The appeal to the International Court of Justice in 1993 brought about a major turning point in the history of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros problem. Both sides found the possibility of solving the complicated issue by peaceful and legal means through an international institution. The recent bilateral treaty between both countries also approves this and guarantees that they will continue in this direction. If the issue can really be solved in this way, the bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary will be released from a historical trauma. In this meaning the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros problem offers them a unique chance to give an instructive precedent not only to Central Europe, but also to other parts of the world.