

Interview

H. E. Rastislav Káčer, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Hungary

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Introduction: In January, 2014, the ICRP conducted a comprehensive interview with Slovakia's Ambassador to Hungary, H. E. Rastislav Káčer. Mr Ambassador provided very valuable opinions and notions on the topic of minority and ethnic issues. In this context, the ICRP were chiefly interested in his personal but also expert perception of past, but also current Slovak-Hungarian relations that have not always been entirely smooth. To sum up, the questions focused on three main areas, namely on the purpose and significance of the cultural diplomacy in bilateral relations, the Slovak-Hungarian issue and the Roma question as a worrisome problem in both neighbouring countries.

Cultural Diplomacy

What role does the cultural diplomacy have in maintaining positive relations of a state with its neighbouring countries and with minorities within the state?

Cultural diplomacy is a very significant additional tool of any kind of diplomacy, not only between neighbouring states and regardless minorities, but in general, even in cases when coercive diplomacy is used. In diplomacy, we can differentiate between soft and hard power instruments and cultural diplomacy is a soft power tool. However, when the use of these two tools is not balanced, neither regarding strategic issues, nor hard power can then be sustainable, if that is not accompanied by an attractive and well-presented soft power. The role of cultural diplomacy is notably substantial for relations of neighbouring states and

particularly when these states are intertwined by mutual long-standing history. The case of Slovak-Hungarian relations is considerably unique because it is a 1000 years old connection. Slovaks and Hungarians had together been formed into modern nations. The reality is, that Czechs had their own kingdom, Romanians during the most of their history had their kingdom, too and likewise Croats. If we look at that conglomerate of nations that once belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then we can see that Slovaks had very intimate historic relations with Hungarians. Actually, there is no nation with which we would have had more intimate relations. Naturally, this familiarity brings many similarities, but simultaneously, it is apparent that many problems can accumulate during the 1000 years long period. When you coexist with someone for so many years you have a lot in common, but there are also many things that can irritate you. That is why an especially significant role is played by the cultural diplomacy here.

In this context, do you think that Slovakia has even stronger ties with Hungary than Czech Republic?

I do not dare to claim this, because Czech-Slovak relations have been very intense during last 70 years and after all, these relations had been tight long before, although Czechs were not part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Despite of that, the intellectual and cultural ties, as well as the linguistic affinity existed already before. On the other side, what I dare to claim with an absolute certainty is that concerning the inner mentality and cultural heritage, Slovaks and Hungarians have the most in common, more than with any other nation. You can notice it even while travelling through Slovakia or Hungary, with regard to cuisine, family habits, traditions, folklore or the behaviour of people under certain life circumstances. In these respects, no other nation stands closer and is more similar to Slovaks than Hungarians and vice versa.

Slovak-Hungarian Relations

You have started to carry out the function of Ambassador of Slovakia to Hungary only recently, basically just few months ago. What are your principal goals and priorities that you would like to achieve in this office?

Practically, I have two main objectives. The first one is bilateral and connected to the question you have asked at the very beginning. In bilateral relations, I particularly care about that nowadays, we managed to make the most of the 1000 years-long coexistence. The Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Empire in general was a powerful, rich and influential state in which in mutual synergy we managed to produce really a lot in Europe. At present, after certain fragmentation Europe anew integrates on the platform of the European Union (EU). I think that it is time to return to the point of our ability to produce a common synergy in the form of a Slovak-Hungarian cooperation so it will become an added economic, but also political value in the frame of the entire EU. From this perspective, I would like to strengthen this mutual cooperation in order to be jointly stronger and able to move forward. And not only concerning the Slovak-Hungarian, but ideally the Visegrad cooperation in the broader context. I am a strong supporter of the Visegrad cooperation and Visegrad cooperation in a broader frame where possible and appropriate, specifically with regard to eventual Visegrad plus Austria, Slovenia or Croatia. This is one of central aims of the cooperation with Hungary, thus to modulate projects that would push Slovakia and Hungary towards a greater impact, power and prosperity in Europe.

The second area is more general and strategic. Slovakia and Hungary share a lot of foreign policy interests. However, we often tend to look excessively inward and focus on our scars from the past and not those much relevant problems that in the global context mean nothing in comparison to challenges that we have to face within the global competition. In this respect, my aim is to carry out such policy so we realise that these challenges that Hungary and Slovakia have to cope with are much grave than those we have between each other. The indisputable fact is that by cooperation we can achieve much more than in a mutual hostility.

In your opinion, what are the major challenges or alternatively, stumbling-blocks in current Slovak-Hungarian relations?

The most of the disputes result from the fact that as I have already mentioned, we had coexisted together for a very long time. During that period, the national policies were liberal and in the Middle Ages, but for the certain time also in Modern Times, the nationality did not have such a dramatic function than after the industrial revolution and national-consciousness process after the 19th century. It means that history brought us a cultural interconnection, intermixture and inhomogeneity that on one side is an enrichment factor, but on the other

side, after the Austro-Hungary Empire's division into successor states, many historical minorities remained to live on territories of various states. This fact has been a source of disputes not only between Slovakia and Hungary, but in general, too. Though, we are not a unique instance as not only the Austro-Hungary Empire, but also other European states have a difficult history. What I want to say is that history can sometimes be a source of irritations and the approach to minority questions can lead to contradictory issues. I can say that this may currently be the only source as in other spheres we can cooperate exceptionally well. I suppose that in 90% or maybe even more than in 90%, we not only have common interests, but often cooperate and move forward together.

We can state that Slovak-Hungarian relations were the most turbulent in 2004–2009, when several controversial milestones occurred. We can for example mention the Slovak amendment to the State Language Act, Hedvig Malina's case or even the refusal for the Hungarian President László Sólyom to entry Slovak territory. From the Hungarian side, we could point out the establishment of certain extremist groups or burning the Slovak flag in front of the Slovak Embassy building in Budapest. How do you perceive these national "clashes" from the perspective of your current position?

I would not dramatically differentiate years 2004–2009 compared to others. I would perhaps rather say that since 2010 until today, the Slovak Hungarian relations have been very satisfactory and during the Slovak independence period since 1993, these relations have probably been best ever. But since 1993, we have experienced several more turbulent periods, for example the Gabčíkovo (Bős)-Nagymaros Dams case and many others. That is why I would not specifically underline these years and designate them as extremely bad. On the other hand, what pleases me very much is the fact that since 2010 until today, the Slovak-Hungarian relations have been very good and constructive at government level. The Prime Ministers have a personally very good relationship between each other. I deem they respect each other greatly and in my opinion, this constructive approach advances the agenda forward. We got used to a new discussion tone which is based on the fact that we do not solve the problems through media or yell at each other over the Danube, but we seek to communicate sophisticatedly and find common views. I am convinced that this is a path on which we should go on. However, this does not mean that we had swept the problems under the rug, but we seek to solve them in an advanced way, not by shouting or in public, but in a

sophisticated and cultural manner as it is appropriate for good neighbours and strategic partners.

Do you therefore think that one of the main reasons largely leading to the improvement of Slovak-Hungarian political and diplomatic relations is that sensitive subjects have been discussed behind the closed door?

Definitely. First of all, there must be a goodwill to solve issues and do that in the way that do not offend or humiliate the partner. This applies also to interpersonal relationships. If we, for instance use crude words, it is difficult to find an adequate solution for such a situation. Simply, the key thing is a use of sophisticated manners and especially manners that do not push the partner to the corner or to such situations that are difficult to politically advocate. The essential thing is to approach the partner with respect and consideration, that he is also confronted by domestic political complications. The worst case is when we seek to solve problems in diplomacy as on the football match, where one side has to win and the other lose. Politics, diplomacy and particularly international relations have to be based on the win-win principle and I think that the current mutual dialog respects these rules.

Could you specify when did the turning point in dialog occur? When did delicate issues start to be discussed in the mentioned way?

I suppose that this turning point occurred in times when the government of Ms Radičová started to operate, but I would perhaps not designate it as such a clear turning moment. I think, that also Fico's cabinet approaching the end of the governance in 2009, likewise the Hungarian part started to be clearly aware that the applied diplomacy was not a good choice, because it reduced our credibility within our relations with other states and did not bring any effective solutions. But if I had to define a turnover, I would claim that it was the onset of Ms Radičová's cabinet and I am very satisfied and glad that the second government of Prime Minister Fico continued in this trend. I even believe, that in a certain sense the current relationship between Prime Ministers is even more qualitative than before. In my view, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán respects greatly Robert Fico and on the contrary, Fico perceives with great seriousness a strong position of Orbán. I hope that the upcoming parliamentary elections in Hungary and presidential elections in Slovakia will not stimulate the Slovak or Hungarian

question, because the potential is still there but it would be a very unhappy decision. I know surely at least from the Slovakian side, that there are no ambitions to use the Hungarian issue and I strongly believe that this question will not be regenerated by some inductive effect.

How do you perceive the issue of dual citizenship?

It is an unhappy topic. I think, that the Dual Citizenship Act adopted by the Hungarian Republic is bad, it was not properly thought out, caused a lot of damage, was adapted purely for domestic political consumption and disregarded legal international usages and customs that are conventional in Europe and globally. Moreover, it was not adopted in accordance with agreed mechanisms that dictate that measures influencing also neighbours, in particular when regarding to minority issues, should be consulted with neighbouring states before the adoption. This Hungarian law is very uncommon and has acted as a serious irritant factor in relation to Slovakia. On the other hand, I have to admit that Slovakia responded with a bad law and bad countermeasure, so we actually got into a kind of impasse, where Slovakia did not reacted in the happiest way to this bad law, because no state should adopt laws by which it gets so easily rid of its own citizens. But this is already the other side of the coin. We were not those who started this bad avalanche. We might have reconsidered our respond and reacted more creatively but it does not change the fact that I am deeply convinced that the Hungarian Act on dual citizenship is bad, purpose-built and politically motivated.

What in your opinion would be a more adequate respond to this law by the Slovak side?

I do not want to speculate about this at present. The Ministry of Interior is preparing the amendment to this law and I think that within a year this amendment could be adopted. I also think that at present it would be premature to discuss what would be a more adequate response. In any case, the mentioned amendment will bring a better legal status and situation in Slovakia in comparison to that of today. But when I previously talked about situations when both partners should leave the round table contented, I also think that Hungarian side should likewise amend some parts of its law on citizenship so that these will not act as unreasonable irritant factors to its neighbours. This law should be modern and should more precisely meet international legal standards as at present. In this regard, we should meet somewhere half way. I think that Slovakia is unfortunately more willing to make some

concessions, but I believe that in these respects, we can manage to find mutually satisfactory solutions within a year.

What is your opinion on the theory, that in Slovak-Hungarian relations is basically no real conflict directly among Slovak and Hungarian citizens, but it is more about a dispute between Slovak and Hungarian political elite. There are also notions that the minority question is raised by political elites at times, when they seek to side-track from more severe society problems, for example economic issues.

I personally agree with this theory. I think that when you need to find some enemy in politics, any intolerance is a miserable tool that is used in times when the society is in a crisis, whether economic or other. It is a kind of an emergency brake which is applied by weak politicians but it occurs anywhere in the world, it is not something specific only for Slovak-Hungarian relations. Concerning the Slovak-Hungarian coexistence, I come from a family that has many bonds with Hungary and I also have a lot of friends with Hungarian as a native language. Moreover, I grew up in Nitra which is situated on the verge of Slovak-Hungarian mixed areas. My mum was a director of a mixed Slovak-Hungarian school for many years and my father was a doctor in Slovak-Hungarian environment and I have never, absolutely never perceived this as any irritant. It was always more about a friendly teasing rather than real problems. When I lived for four years in Belgium, the Flemish-Walloon conflict seemed much more intense and emotional to me in comparison to one that I experienced at home. That is why I agree with this statement to a great extent.

Nowadays, we can consider Slovak-Hungarian relations as rather moderate, when top politicians on both sides seek to avoid disputed areas of minority question in domestic or foreign policy, whilst greater emphasis is put on other issues, in particular on the strengthening of the economic and regional cooperation. You have already partly answered this question. Could you perhaps yet add something?

What unites us and what is really important are projects that stimulate regional development and increase our economic competitiveness in Europe and globally. In this respect, we have many regional development projects for building a common infrastructure. We could more efficiently share EU funds for improving North-South infrastructure, both road and rail

transport. Indeed, it is a paradox that fast train from Bratislava (Pozsony) to Štúrovo (Párkány) goes very quickly but then it continues to Budapest very slowly, so the infrastructure is indeed very poor. Also, if you want to travel to Krakow, it is a picturesque scenic route, but when you go there for a business, it is a suffering. The roads are really bad, the infrastructure linkages are missing. But there is also other kind of infrastructure that is even more essential and on which we work intensively. This is the interconnection of wires and pipelines. In this sphere, we have markedly progressed and we should definitely yet more intensify our work. I would expect greater enthusiasm from the Hungarian side than we see today. So these are domains that we would like to focus on and on which we also focus to some extent as we lead intense discussions. Another area of cooperation that moves us further is a defence question. We consult still more and more about common Visegrad projects or Czecho-Slovak projects of a common airspace protection. These discussions are extended by Hungary, as well by common acquisition and modernization projects that would substantially reduce our costs, so that would be an excellent area of cooperation. Here I could raise an absolutely great example of Nordic cooperation between Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. There are a lot of pragmatic solutions and I think we could more open and liberalise regulations that control trade and thus increase the business flexibility and make this whole Central European region more attractive for foreign investors. It would be outstanding if we succeeded in bringing large investment projects to North-Eastern Hungary or South-Western Slovakia. In this perspective, I would not be jealous at all because it is evident that such investments would have a great gravitational effect for both countries and would cause an economic expansion on both sides of borders.

The fact that, I do not want to say that divides us, but is essential in many aspects, is that Hungary nowadays is a country that is largely criticised by many European states. Some laws and practices of the current government are not always enthusiastically and with open arms perceived among the EU Member States. Hungary receives criticism for not fully democratic procedures and practices. In this view, I would like to stress that Slovakia does not belong to states that would be insensitive to Hungary in this regard. We strive for a very friendly policy that takes into account that we are neighbours. Despite the fact that even if there are certain aspects in Hungary we are not happy with, Slovakia does not always join the critics of other states. We are not the ones who would like to publicly judge Hungary for these practices. We can say what annoys us, but we do not want to do that in a way that would offend our partner.

We seek for an open, friendly and sophisticated dialogue and I expect that such policies will be applied also by Hungary towards Slovakia in the future.

In a broader context, what are common goals of Hungary and Slovakia in the foreign policy? I mean, for example, regarding Balkans region.

In this direction we have absolutely identical attitudes and proceed hand in hand, aiming at stabilising the Balkans. We have many projects individually, likewise Hungary, but complete each other politically. We support the integration of the Balkans into the EU, but of course on the basis that they meet all the necessary conditions. In this aspect, we seek to help these states as much as possible, for instance concerning inevitable reforms, development assistance, know-how, etc. The Slovak-Hungarian policy is identical in foreign affairs. If we mention the Eastern policy towards Ukraine or the former Soviet Union area, approaches relating NATO operations or joint EU foreign security policy, there are no considerable differences. If you asked in what aspects is the Slovak position different, I could not be able to point out such an example. The truth is that the Balkans is a number one priority in the foreign policy scale for both of us and thus we also behave.

I have recently read an article of one Hungarian political analyst who stated that according to him, Hungary has closest relations definitely with Slovakia from all its neighbours. These two states have much in common, not only concerning the cultural heritage or foreign policy objectives, but they also share a very similar national mentality. Could you agree with this statement?

I absolutely share this view. If I was supposed to write it by myself, I would not write it otherwise. This reflects the reality and every emphatic person can feel it. The only thing that distinguishes us is the language, nothing else, because traditions, family routines, folklore, art, cuisine or even bad things like certain scepticism and cynicism are similar. Language is the only consideration that distinguishes us. All other things are only nuances. Maybe people who have lived their entire life in one village do not realise it that much. Especially in the past, when people were born, got married, worked and died in one village, they perceived the differences more intensely. But I am a person who has spent half-life abroad since 1989 and I can say that if you look at daily routines from a different way, you will find out that the

resemblance is incredible. However, there is not only a Slovak-Hungarian similarity. I personally also feel a very strong Central European identity, because the fact is that the Austro-Hungary Empire was a political, economic and cultural phenomenon that created our historic reality for centuries. This reality contributed to the formation of our common identity. I can feel that identity when traveling through Austrian villages, but also in Bavaria, Czech Republic, Slovenia or Croatia. There is something like a Central European spirit, an element of Central European identity that distinguishes us from the rest of Europe. Regarding broader, European identity, we often hesitate over it and think that it is only theoretical. I lived for five years in the US and I can tell that I have never felt more European than when I lived there. So when you look at it from afar, in confrontation with other cultures and environments, then you realize how close we stand to each other and what meaningless disputes we share.

Roma Issue

In Slovakia, there are two main issues constantly dominating in the minority perspective. These are besides Hungarian question, also the Roma issue. In terms of vision for the future, during let's say next five years, which minority question will in your opinion attract more attention in political and diplomatic spheres, but also in general public?

Definitely the Roma question. But I would not compare Hungarian and Roma questions as minority problems. I do not perceive Hungarian question or people having Hungarian as a mother tongue in Slovakia as a problem for the future. I think that it will not be a problem for the future and actually it is not a problem even today. It is rather a political capital thing than a real problem. I think Slovakia is very tolerant to Hungarian minority and native Hungarian speakers. The fact that we have had such a consistently strong and numerous Hungarian community for so many years in Slovakia is a sufficiently reliable evidence. Regarding Roma people, it is a completely different level of problem, because it is a cultural, as well as social phenomenon. I am not an expert on Roma issue and I cannot offer any recipes, but I suppose this problem has potentials to grow more severe in the near future. It is necessary to seek solutions not only on the Slovak or Hungarian level, but also on the European stage. The Roma minority and its integration to major communities is a cross-cutting issue in the EU. Hungarian citizens are fully integrated into our society in any context but Roma minority poses a serious social problem. Their integration is a matter of the EU, too. That does not mean that I want to divest responsibility and I think we should not do that, but it is a broader

problem that covers the entire EU. We should have a unified policy on how to uphold Roma community so that their social status and integration would be smooth. I think that we unfortunately cannot solve this situation within next few years, so we have to be patient in this regard. I also would like to add, that the Roma issue does not divide, but unites Slovakia and Hungary because this problem is similar in our countries. We should rather learn from experiences of one another, get inspired by the Hungarian government and thus find out more easily which measures and practices are more or less efficient. This is what we could do at least.

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