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The Circumstances of the Foundation of Hungarian Political Parties in Slovakia

Abstract: The Hungarian community in Slovakia lives mostly in the southern regions along the Slovak–Hungarian border. After the First World War (1914–1918), the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed, and the Hungarians, who had previously lived there, became residents of one of the newly created successor states, Czechoslovakia, as a result of the Treaty of Trianon. In 1919, 689,565 people declared themselves to be of Hungarian nationality. They constituted 23.59% of the population. The Slovak Republic was established on January 1, 1993; at that time, there were 567,296 Hungarians living in Slovakia, making up 10.8% of the population. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census data, 422,065 citizens of Slovakia claim Hungarian nationality as a matter of priority, which constitutes 7.75% of the Slovak population (in addition, another 34,089 claim Hungarian as their second nationality). Hungarians in Slovakia are the largest national minority. They consider themselves to be people of Hungarian nationality. It is a public declaration of belonging to the Hungarian nation, not in the sense of a political nation, but in the sense of cultural and linguistic belonging. In the sense of a political nation, Hungarians in Slovakia primarily identify themselves as citizens of the Slovak Republic. Without them, there would not be Hungarian parties in Slovakia.

Keywords: Hungarian community in Slovakia; national minority; identity; citizens of the Slovak Republic; Hungarian parties in Slovakia

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The creation of parties after November 1989

The first representative of the Hungarian political elite in Slovakia—and at the same time the first political movement for a change in the political system in Czechoslovakia—was

the Független Magyar Kezdeményezés (FMK[1]) which was founded on November 18, 1989. It was thus the first systemic political movement, as the Czech Civic Forum (Czech: Občanské forum; OF) and the Slovak Public Against Violence (Slovak: Verejnosť proti násiliu; VPN) were established a day later, on November 19, 1989.

The circumstances of the foundation of the FMK were interesting. Lajos Tóth, a well-known Hungarian teacher working in Šala, and the founder of the Vörösmarty Klub educational association, celebrated his 50th birthday on November 18, 1989, and on this occasion he organized a scientific conference entitled The Existential Status of Hungarian Intelligence in Czechoslovakia as a friendly meeting for 130 invited guests. After the conference, a smaller group gathered in the apartment of Károly Tóth and Eleonóra Sándor, who were also present at the conference, and together they founded the FMK.

The founding members of the FMK came from the Committee for the Protection of the Rights of the Hungarian Minority in Czechoslovakia, the Rescue Group of Hungarian Schools, Iródia, Erté Studio, and the Hungarian Pen Club in Czechoslovakia, and the members also included leading figures from student movements of the 1960s.[2] As for the name of the movement, the term "independent" did not refer to nationality and did not mean distancing oneself from Czechoslovakia or the Slovaks, but it expressed the independence of the movement from the state authorities and state structures.[3] In its statutes that were established on February 24, 1990, the FMK declared that "It wishes to be a continuation of all the political, social, and individual efforts that have represented independent, autonomous thinking and attitudes toward the arbitrariness of power in recent decades."[4]

On February 19, 1990, the FMK was registered by the Slovak Ministry of Interior and Environment as a political movement under the Political Parties Act adopted on January

1 Független Magyar Kezdeményezés in Hungarian; Maďarská nezávislá iniciatíva in Slovak; Independent Hungarian Initiative in English.

2 Ezt tettük – ezt akartuk (We did this – we wanted this) Source: [https://leveltar.adatbank.sk/?p=101191] "Iródia" was a creative workshop for young writers established in 1983 in Nové Zámky. "Erté Studio" was founded in 1987 as an experimental art association, also in Nové Zámky.

3 Ildikó Haraszti: Mi nem autonómiára törekszünk! (We strive not for autonomy!), *Új Szó*, December 2, 1989, p. 4; A Független Magyar Kezdeményezés sajtóértekezlete: Alapelvek és célok (Independent Hungarian Initiative Press Conference: Basic Principles and Objectives) (ČSTK), *Új Szó*, December 6, 1989, pp. 1–2.

4 A Független Magyar Kezdeményezés Alapszabályzata (Statutes of Independent Hungarian Initiative) Source: [https://leveltar.adatbank.sk/gyujtemeny/a-fuggetlen-magyar-kezdemenyezes-alapszabalyzat/]

23, 1990 (Popély – Simon 2009: 434). The second entity in the row of the emerging system of Hungarian parties was the Magyar Kereszténydemokrata Mozgalom (MKDM[5]). According to the registration application that it submitted to the Ministry of the Interior,[6] MKDM was founded on January 18, 1990, and the Slovak Ministry of Interior and Environment registered it as a political movement on March 19, 1990 (K. Cséfalvay 1995: 32–33).

The third Hungarian political entity was the political movement Coexistence (Együttélés-Spolužitie-Wspólnota-Soužití), which was officially registered by the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic on February 27, 1990, and the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic on March 1, 1990. However, the unofficial origin of the movement seems to be of an earlier date, as the program statement of the preparatory committee of the political movement Coexistence was published in the daily *Új Szó*[7] as early as February 7, 1990. The name Coexistence was to emphasize the coexistence of different nationalities, based on "patience, forgiveness, mutual respect, mutual knowledge of culture and language. Without equality, parity and law, normal coexistence is not conceivable. Let political and social norms of coexistence be created on the basis of com-

5 Magyar Kereszténydemokrata Mozgalom in Hungarian; Maďarské kresťanskodemokratické hnutie in Slovak; Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement in English.

6 Various events (or at least different names) are associated with this date. On November 2, an appeal titled "On the Organization of Hungarian Christian Democratic Clubs," signed by Rudolf Hamerlík and László Rajczy, was published in the daily *Nap* (which was published by the FMK), stating that an organizing committee of the Hungarian Christian Democratic Clubs had been set up in Bratislava that day. However, according to one of the founders of the MKDM, Gábor Agárdy (see Agárdy in K. Cséfalvay 1995: 35, and *Új Szó*, April 20 1990), the Temporary Regional Organising Committee of Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement was established on that day. However, neither Hamerlík and Rajczy nor Agárdy mention the establishment of the MKDM. At the same point, Agárdy writes a few lines below that "on January 18, we set out to wake up the Hungarian Christian people from their deep sleep…"; however, it cannot be inferred that this means not only the creation of a temporary committee but also the establishment of the MKDM. When at a meeting in Bratislava, the first chairman of the MKDM, Kálmán Janics, also mentioned January 18 and that "the goal [was] to establish Hungarian Christian Democratic Clubs," but he had already emphasized the need to establish an independent Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement. "At the time, I still had the impression that the majority (…) only supported the idea of clubs. However, the situation changed, the supporters of an independent Hungarian organisation founded Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement with the support of a large majority" (K. Janics in K. Cséfalvay 1995: 11). Although he does not state whether it happened on the same day (i.e., January 18), depending on the context, this can be understood and it also follows from the application for registration submitted to the Ministry of the Interior.

7 *Új Szó* is the only existing daily printed in Hungarian in the Slovak Republic and has been published since December 1948.

mon interests linked to common residence. Let the basis of coexistence be general autonomy."[8]

In late autumn 1989, two more Hungarian groups were created. On November 22, the Hungarian Students Union (HSU; Hungarian: Magyar Diákszövetség [MDSZ]), and on November 24, the Forum of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia (FHCZ[9]); yet, these did not become political parties.

Fault lines: differences in political identities

With the establishment of Coexistence and the MKDM alongside the FMK, the first Hungarian party system in post-regime change Slovakia came into being. Namely, this was the development that the FMK had desired from the beginning, though it was not exactly as they had envisioned. Subsequently, earlier disagreements took on new dimensions. What until then had essentially been an intellectual debate (since only the FMK was a major political player in the true sense of the term, unlike Csemadok and the FHCZ), and which all parties had unanimously declared as a positive aspect of democracy, now started to exhibit increasingly sharp fault lines and become a tool of political competition. Lajos Grendel and László Dobos both emphasized that disagreements were not problematic unless they led to "some sort of foolish rivalry"; thus it is evident that political rivalry began in the early spring of 1990, just a few months before the first free parliamentary elections. Not only did the existing nascent fault lines sharpen, but new ones also emerged.

These fault lines—fundamental principles to which the parties had different approaches, leading to different political practices—primarily developed between the FMK and Coexistence but also to some extent between the FMK and MKDM, as the latter was ideologically closer to Coexistence. The contradictions in the principles of political activity, evident from the outset, are difficult to disentangle, because they were closely interconnected and one stemmed from the other. However, it is both worthwhile and necessary to untangle these issues for analysis, as they highlight key differences in perspectives that continue to shape Hungarian politics and public life in Slovakia today. These differences still affect the political identity of Slovakia's political elite and the Hungarian population. The following is a list of these fault lines, though their order is arbitrary; in reality, each

8 Együttélés Politikai Mozgalom a Demokráciáért és a Nemzeti Kisebbségek Jogaiért, 8. pont (Political Movement Coexistence for Democracy and the Rights of National Minorities, point 8), *Új Szó*, 7 February 1990, p. 4.

9 Csehszlovákiai Magyarok Fóruma in Hungarian; Forum of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia (FHCZ) in English.

principle was simultaneously at play and influential. Another question is how much these differing approaches, which led to divergent political decisions, were driven by pragmatic political calculations aimed at advancing the interests of each party.

More ideological fault lines?

The first fault lines were along the "communists versus regime-changing democrats" issue. The FMK openly distanced itself from the communists representing the totalitarian system, in contrast to what the FMK and partly MKDM defined as Coexistence's less decisive position. The first major divide was between the communists and the regime-changing democrats. The key question was whether reforming the socialist system was sufficient, or whether a radical regime change—involving a complete rejection of socialism and return to capitalism—was needed. Representatives of the FMK firmly supported the latter, which they defined as true democracy, believing that essential prerequisites for democracy were dismantling the communist party's monopoly and holding free elections.

As a result, the FMK considered a clear and explicit break from the communist party and the socialist system to be crucial. They were so confident in the radical nature of the regime change that they "believed the communist party would disappear" (László Öllös in Popély – Simon 2009: 514). In the FMK's statement of principles dated November 24, 1989, the first point asserted that it "rejects all totalitarian ideologies."[10] However, it is important to note that the Slovak opposition, and later the regime-changing movement VPN–FMK, was the VPN's partner movement (in the beginning even its think tank,[11] according to the recollections of FMK's founders) and was not initially as firm or clear in its stance on a complete break from the socialist system and radical regime change.

10 The Statement of Principles of the Független Magyar Kezdeményezés. Source: [https://leveltar.adatbank.sk/gyujtemeny/a-fuggetlen-magyar-kezdemenyezes-elvi-nyilatkozata-2/]

11 "The prominent role of FMK members during the early weeks and months can be attributed to the fact that we had a clear vision of how to carry out a revolution, implement change, identify key tasks, and dismantle a social system. Many of us were well versed in critical social theory, and it is important to note that we had strong connections with opposition figures in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Our greatest advantage, which the Independent Hungarian Initiative effectively leveraged, was the firsthand experience with the Hungarian regime change – every detail of it" (László A. Nagy in Popély – Simon 2009: 425). Károly Tóth echoed this sentiment: "Our political influence far exceeded what we could have achieved as a minority organization" (Károly Tóth in Popély – Simon 2009: 739). See also the excerpt from the FMK spokesperson's statement: the FMK "played a crucial role in establishing the NyEE executive committee and shaping its work." Már a választások jegyében. Megtartotta első országos közgyűlését a Független Magyar Kezdeményezés (Already in the spirit of elections. The Independent Hungarian Initiative held its first national assembly). *Új Szó*, February 26, 1990, pp. 1–2.

Károly Tóth mentioned a meeting with Slovak opposition members held in October 1989, only one month before the revolutionary events. At the meeting, "all the key figures of the later political leadership were present," and political issues arose. The conversation revolved around "how [they] envisioned the democratization process in Slovakia. At that time, Miroslav Kusý and his group unquestionably favored Alexander Dubček and a vision of democratic socialism. The figure of Dubček was mentioned in this discussion as a potential solution, as a way to rehabilitate the 'socialism with a human face' of 1968" (Károly Tóth in Popély – Simon 2009: 725). This idea persisted even during the November events: "The key question was whether there would be a genuine regime change or just some cosmetic adjustments to the system. That was decided in the early days. Most Slovak reformers believed it was only about system tweaks. That is why they were often taken aback when we insisted that constitutional changes were necessary" (A. Nagy László in Popély – Simon 2009: 425).

László Gyurovszky had a similar experience at the opposition meeting held at Galéria Umelka in Bratislava the day after the events in Prague: "It was a powerful moment for everyone experiencing that open criticism of the system was finally beginning. But for us Hungarians, it was also clear that this was not enough. These people, 99.99% of them, had no experience in opposition politics; they did not understand what was happening in the Czech Republic or Hungary and had no idea what needed to be done. They held unrealistic expectations, which later became apparent" (László Gyurovszky in Popély – Simon 2009: 195).

However, not everyone within the FMK's core group initially believed in the possibility of a radical regime change—not even Lajos Grendel. "I think that Károly Tóth, László Öllös, and Nóra Sándor were more radical about this. I did not believe the system could change. I believed—well, 1968 was a defining experience of my youth—that something similar could happen again. [...] I did not believe that a radical regime change would occur. In fact, I only started to believe towards the end of 1989 that a real regime change would happen, and not just some sort of reshaping of the old system." (Lajos Grendel in Popély – Simon 2010: 134)

It is also noteworthy that the VPN, despite including former communists who were active until the regime change (apart from the reform communists),[12] adopted a strong-

12 According to Peter Zajac, a leading ideologist of the liberal wing of the VPN, its view on communists was that they fell into two categories: "immediately aware" (in Slov. *okamžite uvedomelí*) communists and "the rest" (*tí druhí*). The former quickly grasped the significance of the 1989 changes, while the latter "merely adopted the idea of change as a political badge, like a strategic mask needed at the time" (Zajac, Peter: Päť rokov po. Domino efekt 1994, no. 29, p. 7, cited in Pekník 2016: 42). Despite this distinction, both types of communists were represented within the VPN.

ly anti-communist stance. This was evident in their repeated calls at protests for the removal of "old structures" and slogans targeting communists, such as "*nie sme ako oni*," ("we are different/we differ from them"). However, due to a shortage of its own politicians and experts, the VPN soon had to involve not only '68ers but also active communists in the regime change process. This was likely done with the FMK's knowledge and consent,[13] though this was probably not a matter of contention since the FMK also included former party members.

The FMK's opposition to the FHCZ partly arose from concerns that the FHCZ was not truly committed to radical regime change. This suspicion was fueled by the FHCZ's origins with the '68ers, whom the FMK members may have believed still supported reforming socialism, as they frequently referenced the events of 1968.[14] This belief was further strengthened by the fact that their suggestion on November 25 for the FHCZ to join the VPN Coordination Committee, as the FMK had done, did not yield any practical results.[15]
In the period leading up to the establishment of Coexistence, the FMK grew increasingly concerned as its co-opted representatives began to assert their independence by raising Hungarian issues and diverging from the FMK's positions, especially on matters like the proposed Hungarian university in Czechoslovakia and criticism of the electoral law. "While democratic forces on both sides [i.e., in Slovakia and the Czech Republic] worked to dismantle communist power and risked their popularity, they were busy giv-

13 "The opposition and the various opposition movements in Slovakia were unprepared. They lacked information about how the regime change was unfolding. [...] They had no clear plans for the parliament, including what to do with it, how long it should operate, or who would govern the country. Both Slovak and Czech colleagues were uncertain in those early days. A Czech–Slovak coordination was established between Havel's and Budaj's teams in Prague and Bratislava. Without any pretense, I can say that we were the ones providing guidance. [...] In every major political issue, we not only shared our views but were also actively involved in decision-making, including personnel decisions" (László A. Nagy in Popély – Simon 2009: 425). Similarly, "It is important to note that during the initial period, the first six months to a year, we were politically much more active than the Slovaks" (László Gyurovszky in Popély – Simon 2009: 194).

14 László Dobos made the following statement six months later: "This time, it is not about reforming something, but about rejecting the previous, utterly unworkable structure" (Péter Miklósi: Interview with László Dobos, *Hét*, no. 26, June 29 1990, p. 2). By then, it had long been decided that the country would not continue in a reformist socialist direction.

15 According to László Öllös, "the fundamental expectation of the '68ers during the Gorbachev era was to regain their place within the party-state, obviously within a more open party-state, where they could, so to speak, dismantle the nationalism of the Husák regime and create positions for Hungarians. Essentially, they wanted to return to the 1968 model. That was what they knew and attempted to do." In contrast, the FMK "did not want this; they wanted pluralism. [...] They aimed to form a counterbalance to communism, even against a potentially reformed Communist Party or a party shaped by glasnost or perestroika, forcing it into public debate and organizing the Hungarian society in Slovakia. This was a fundamentally different strategy" (László Öllös in Popély – Simon 2009: 499–500).

ing campaign speeches and preparing for elections. They began what Miklós Duray referred to as the 'national class struggle' in Vienna."[16] This was particularly disappointing for the FMK members, who had relied on Miklós Duray to help overthrow the totalitarian regime. According to the FMK's press statement in April, they had "immediately made room for Dr. Miklós Duray, seeing him as the most credible and revolutionary figure among Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. They had hoped he would return from Budapest upon hearing of the revolution and take part in dismantling the party-state."[17]

After the establishment of Coexistence, the FMK criticized the political movement for being open to former communists. They remarked, "In the movement initiated by Miklós Duray, which was likely seen as very sincere, individuals who had been ousted from the party and its leadership during the November revolution are now becoming active again. This is frustrating for us, as the FMK also played a significant role in their removal."[18] Another similar view was expressed: "Coexistence brought together the 1968 generation [...] former communist leaders, local functionaries, agricultural leaders, district and municipal level communist mayors, and other officials. It also harbored hardline Hungarian nationalists from summer camps and clubs, with Miklós Duray leading them. He legitimized them; with his background in opposition, no local communist could be labeled a communist anymore—they had become nationalists. Initially, they were supported by *Új Szó*, which also included journalists with old party connections and those who saw us as revolutionary, immature youth. In contrast, they were experienced, well-known, and established figures in the Slovak Hungarian community" (László Öllös in Popély – Simon 2009: 516).

The FMK also criticized the founding charter of Coexistence for lacking explicit anti-communist criticism. While it is true that the founding charter, dated March 31, 1990,[19] did not include direct criticism of communism, the communist party's monopoly had already ended by that time. Thus, opposition to the totalitarian party-state was no longer relevant. Moreover, the movement's name "Együttélés–Spolužitie (Coexistence): A Political Movement for Democracy and the Rights of National Minorities" also supported democracy. Their founding charter stated that it would "work for democracy and

16 Károly Tóth: Hol fogunk élni? A Független Magyar Kezdeményezés a választások küszöbén (Where Will We Live? The Independent Hungarian Initiative on the Eve of the Elections), *Nap*, June 5, 1990, p. 5.

17 FMK Press Service: Vigyázó szemetek a jövőre vessétek... (Keep a Watchful Eye on the Future...) *Új Szó*, April 19, 1990, p. 3.

18 Péter Miklósi: Interjú Tóth Károllyal (Interview with Károly Tóth), *Hét*, no. 12, April 20, 1990, p. 2.

19 Source: [https://leveltar.adatbank.sk/gyujtemeny/az-egyutteles-politikai-mozgalom-alapito-levele/]

the rule of law," aiming to implement democratic principles in political practice and envisioning political representation only within a democratic, pluralistic system. This also implied rejecting the previously socialist, one-party political system. Moreover, it would have been difficult to imagine Miklós Duray, a long-time opposition figure, suddenly showing "understanding" toward the communist dictatorship right at the dawn of the new political era. At the same time, it is true that he did not lump former communists together and did not exclude them from Coexistence. In other words, he acted similarly to the VPN and the FMK. Like the VPN's,[20] Duray's actions were likely driven by political pragmatism, recognizing the importance of these individuals' professional expertise and local influence for Coexistence's success (meaning that political foresight and practical considerations likely influenced his decision).

In any case, when asked by a journalist about the widespread belief that "Coexistence is a gathering place for communists or former communists," he responded, "There is not a single political movement in Czechoslovakia today where former Communist Party members are not involved. This applies to OF, the VPN, the FMK, and perhaps all but the Christian Democrats. I must say that raising the issue in such a way is malicious, as Coexistence has no more former Communist Party members than any other group. I believe that judging people today solely on whether they were once part of the state party is unfair. It is thanks to honest individuals within the ranks of the communists that conditions did not deteriorate completely over the past twenty years, and that there was an internal opposition within the party that aimed to guide it toward a more moral path. In fact, 1968 happened because a fraction within the party rejected the traditional communist label. So, those who were party members but acted honorably and genuinely worked for societal improvement should not be condemned. It is also worth noting that many non-party members, who were the majority, might not have been innocent either. They could have been corrupt, compliant, and unprincipled supporters of the totalitarian power. The only fair way to assess people is by their character. Those who were dishonorable, whether inside or outside the party, should not be aligned with."[21]

20 Without their involvement, the VPN would not have won the first free elections. In the April 1990 public opinion poll, the VPN ranked fifth. By May, the KDH was still leading with 29.1%, but the VPN had risen to second place with 13.1%, closely followed by the KSS in third with 12.8% support (Pekník 2016: 37). Concerned about the KDH, which was also regarded as its main ally, the VPN strategically placed reformist-era and normalization communists at the top of its electoral list. This tactic proved successful (Krno – Slobodníková 2016: 71; Žatkuliak 2009: 20). László Öllös also observed that the VPN "did not have enough well-known, accepted figures to fill ministerial positions, so they had to seek people for the highest roles, which opened the door for the communists" (László Öllös in Popély – Simon 2009: 508).

21 János Mészáros: Ki képviseljen bennünket? Sajátos parlamenti képviselet kell. Beszélgetés dr. Duray Miklóssal, az Együttélés politikai mozgalom elnökével (Who Should Represent Us?

Coexistence faced accusations of harboring former communists throughout the election campaign. It is likely no coincidence that just before the elections, on June 6, 1990, the movement felt compelled to address this in an open letter to Czechoslovak Hungarians, urging them to participate. Among other things, they wrote: "Coexistence is accused of being a haven for communists and former party members. We firmly distance ourselves from those who bear real guilt, who were overly loyal servants or petty tyrants of the dictatorship throughout decades. However, our condemnation of the Communist Party's dictatorship does not mean we apply collective guilt. We do not wish to carry over or preserve any of the Communist Party's moral burdens or responsibilities. Only those free from moral and political burdens have a place within Coexistence and our electoral coalition partner, the MKDM. We believe in the people's right to hold their own opinions, and, in different circumstances, the right to change them too."[22]

The presence of former communists in Coexistence initially caused friction with its coalition partner, the MKDM, which was often cited as the only Hungarian party without former communists. László Gyurgyík recalls: "In the early days of Coexistence, in the first batch, there were quite a few former party members. Some of them were not just regular members either. For the MKDM members, this was somewhat of a scandal—what were these people doing here? These dynamics need to be taken into account. All of this unfolded very quickly, within a month or two, during the first election period" (László Gyurgyík in Popély – Simon 2010: 158).

We Need a Unique Parliamentary Representation. Interview with Dr. Miklós Duray, President of Coexistence Political Movement) *Új Szó*, April 2, 1990, p. 3.

22 Nyílt levél a csehszlovákiai magyarokhoz! (Open Letter to the Hungarians of Czechoslovakia!) *Új Szó*, June 6, 1990, p. 5. See also Václav Havel's response to a journalist's question in December 1989 about his relationship with the communists and the Communist Party: "'There are many intelligent, talented, creative people among them who were condemned to silence for decades, just like many of those who were not party members." The journalist asked, "Forgive me for interrupting, but did they really have to remain silent? It depended on their courage." Havel responded: "Perhaps they did not have to. But when they spoke up, it brought them trouble, or they were simply not listened to. I believe that our fellow citizens who were party members feel just as relieved as the rest of society because now they are being heard. And this is very important for society. I think the task of the communists is to renew their party as quickly as possible, to transform it into a modern party that renounces total control and enters the future pluralistic democratic system as any other political force. And this entire uprising—If we can call these dramatic events, currently unfolding and symbolized by the Civic Forum, an uprising—was not launched against the communists but against the system of total control." Párbeszéd két tüntetés között. Szükség van a toleranciára. Néhány kérdés Václav Havelhez (Dialogue between Two Protests. Tolerance is Needed. A Few Questions for Václav Havel) *Új Szó*, December 6, 1989, p. 4.

Incidentally, the MKDM's March 1990 program (K. Cséfalvay 1995: 45–49) did not contain an explicit anti-communist critique either; yet, this was not criticized by the FMK. However, the program did address the past in its 11th point, stating: "Our ideological approach is one of forgiveness. We believe that uncovering past mistakes and learning from them is more important for our future than holding all the guilty accountable." Like Coexistence, the MKDM rejected the idea of collective guilt for former communists. Additionally, in its 4th point, the MKDM endorsed the values of pluralism, the rule of law, and the welfare state—values that directly opposed the totalitarian party system.

The question arises: what saved the MKDM from facing the same criticism from the FMK as Coexistence had? Several factors could explain this. First, there were no former communists in the MKDM. Second, the FMK had a role in the founding of the MKDM, even though the party that ultimately emerged and the coalition that it entered for the parliamentary elections—specifically the alliance with Coexistence—did not align with the FMK and VPN's vision.[23]

To the FMK, Coexistence was seen as a direct challenge, a veritable low blow. Its founder, Miklós Duray, was serving in the Federal Assembly's Chamber of Nations as a delegate for the VPN and FMK.[24] However, the party that he had established had completely different priorities from those of the FMK. This is echoed in Károly Tóth's recollections: "Later, it seemed entirely natural to us that other parties were forming. We even considered creating a Hungarian agrarian or social democratic party. We were practically the ones who launched the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement. [...] But what truly bothered us was that these parties were not focused on expanding freedom or playing by the rules; they were only interested in pushing us out of the political arena. And this was happening at the very start of the regime change. What outraged us even more was that some from our own ranks were starting parties based on national or other divides, which ran counter to the whole process. To us, liberalism at that time meant the legal enshrinement of freedoms and real regime change" (Károly Tóth in Popély – Simon 2009: 729–730).

Another factor for friction was the FMK's broader vision for regime change, which was not just about transforming the political system but also about reforming social orga-

23 Several people have mentioned this, including Kálmán Janics in K. Cséfalvay 1995: 13; Gyurgyík and Agárdy, and from the other side (Öllös in Popély – Simon 2009: 514), Tóth, and Gyurovszky.

24 On January 30, 1990, Miklós Duray was appointed to the Federal Assembly alongside 120 new representatives, filling the seats left vacant by those who had resigned, including eight Hungarian representatives (Popély – Simon 2009: 789).

nizations. The FMK sought to "depoliticize social organizations—most notably Csemadok—and envisioned a civil society where these organizations had clear, focused objectives" (Öllös 2004: 58). They believed that "under new laws, cultural and social activities should be clearly separated. This is why [they] 'attacked' Csemadok, asking it to undergo internal restructuring and focus on apolitical, value-driven cultural activities."[25] The FMK struggled to accept that Csemadok, while claiming to be a cultural organization, took on political roles by strongly supporting Coexistence in the name of Hungarian interests.[26] This made it even harder for the FMK to accept Coexistence, which was built on Csemadok's foundations.

It is important to consider that this division might have been a significant turning point if the other two Hungarian parties had also been formed in November 1989. In those early revolutionary days, when the situation was highly fluid and uncertain, with the possibility of a rollback, it was taken seriously to clearly and publicly condemn totalitarian ideology. However, by early 1990, after Coexistence and the MKDM had been established, the public discourse focused on other political topics and the approaching first free parliamentary elections. While emphasizing this division was understandable from the FMK's perspective, it was likely already part of the campaign strategy.

At the same time, the FMK (and the VPN) likely had genuine concerns that the Communist Party might perform well in the elections. According to public opinion polls, the Communist Party ranked second in April, while the VPN only placed fifth. Although the VPN managed to rise to second place by May, the Communist Party still held a strong third-place position (Laluha 2016: 440; Pekník 2016: 37). This likely explains why the FMK continued to stress the importance of uniting democratic forces. Károly Tóth's notably passionate remarks seemingly reflected this concern: "I believe there are two processes at work in today's political life. To counter the latent influence of the Communist Party, it is essential for democratic forces to unite or form temporary alliances. [...] The issue of national minorities is particularly challenging. Anyone advocating for democracy in Slovakia today, rather than national democracy (which we have been opposing for 70 years), must weigh these factors. Otherwise, the noble ideal of democracy risks becoming a mere slogan, or through isolation, taking on a different meaning. [...] The minority issue can only be resolved through a democracy that upholds the rights of minorities—whether political, religious, or national—as sacred and inviolable."[27]

25 Péter Miklósi: Interjú Tóth Károllyal (Interview with Károly Tóth), *Hét*, no. 16, April 20, 1990, p. 2.

26 It has since become clear that some parts of civil society in liberal democracies are not apolitical; on the contrary, they advance various political agendas.

27 Károly Tóth: A demokrácia esélyei avagy a többség hatalma és a kisebbség joga (The Chances of Democracy, or the Power of the Majority and the Rights of the Minority), *Nap*, May 8, 1990, p. 5.

In hindsight, it appears that this fault line was mainly about establishing who the real leaders of change were. For the FMK, this was a much more crucial issue than it was for Coexistence or the MKDM. The FMK criticized Coexistence for not prioritizing this, suggesting they were not truly committed to dismantling the party-state. The FMK likely felt frustrated that it had to handle the difficult, unpopular tasks while the other two parties were benefiting from the path it had paved, and were even trying to take credit for it.[28]

"We participated in a revolution, and our achievements should not be underestimated," said Károly Tóth before the first FMK assembly on February 21, 1990.[29] At the press conference following the assembly on February 26, FMK representatives detailed these achievements: "The FMK played a key role in overthrowing the dictatorial regime, dismantling the state power structure in Hungarian-populated areas, participating in government formation talks, and nominating Sándor Varga as deputy prime minister.[30] It also proposed delegates for parliament and the Slovak National Council.[31] However, its most significant achievement was the joint declaration with the VPN, published in the Verejnosť and NAP newspapers. The declaration represented a unique political platform in Europe bridging the majority and a national minority."[32]

The facts listed above are undeniable to the FMK, and even if Coexistence and the MKDM had wanted to, they could not have claimed these for themselves. However, with

28 The VPN perceived this issue in the same way. In the May 8, 1990, edition of *Verejnost'*, the VPN's daily newspaper with a circulation of 200,000, an article titled "Az ötös szám esélyei" (The Chances of Number Five, *Šance čísla päť*) describes the VPN as "a person in dirty work clothes, working in a barn, who has somewhat cleaned it up, while citizens standing further away, dressed in white, ironed shirts, look at them with mixed feelings." The article admits that the "cleaning of the barns" with its radical steps might have caused public displeasure and that the VPN's "minor failures or mistakes were much more noticeable in their own environment than the overall social benefits that resulted" (cited in Pekník 2016: 40). The FMK had similar grievances.

29 József Szilvássy: Az első közgyűlés előtt (Before the First Assembly), *Új Szó*, February 21, 1990, p. 4.

30 In the Slovak government re-formed on December 12, 1989, with Milan Čič as the prime minister, Sándor Varga became the first deputy prime minister of Hungarian nationality in the Slovak government.

31 On February 9, 1990, Gábor Zászlós was elected as the Vice President of the Slovak National Council and the Chairman of the National Committee. He had been nominated by the FMK and became a parliamentary representative of the VPN on January 12 (Popély – Simon 2009: 788).

32 Már a választások jegyében. Megtartotta első országos közgyűlését a Független Magyar Kezdeményezés (Under the Auspices of the Elections. The Independent Hungarian Initiative Held Its First National Assembly), *Új Szó*, February 26, 1990, pp. 1–2. For more details about this event, see Chapter 5.

the establishment of a pluralistic democracy, they too had the right to enter the political arena and be evaluated based on their own vision, not the FMK's, in the first free parliamentary elections and later in the local elections. This independent vision, however, heightened the tensions between the FMK and Coexistence, and later between the FMK and the Coexistence–MKDM coalition, deepening the fault lines and leading to a tough election campaign.

Minority rights versus democracy?

Another factor as a fault line between the Hungarian parties was the following issue: the creation of democracy is the primary goal from which minority rights can be derived (as pursued by the FMK) versus the idea that democracy alone does not guarantee minority rights so these must be addressed as a priority (as pursued by Coexistence). The essence of this second fault line was what the parties considered their primary goals: democratic regime change or minority protection. The fundamental question that divided the political elite was whether minority rights, like other rights, could be guaranteed by democracy—even if not automatically—or whether democracy alone does not guarantee minority rights, making it essential for a party identifying as Hungarian to prioritize the latter. Simplified, the question was: should we primarily be democrats or Hungarians? This is the dilemma that Lajos Grendel mentioned during a December 1989 roundtable discussion in *Új Szó*, which he resolved by emphasizing the primacy of achieving democracy. On the other hand, László Dobos believed that both tasks should be addressed simultaneously (i.e., one should be both democratic and Hungarian), or at the very least, the nationality issue should not be relegated to second place. Both of them were right; it is evident when referring back to their conversation, especially the part where Dobos, essentially foreshadowing the position of Coexistence, stated that the generation of 1968 was more radical than the FMK. Grendel responded by saying they were also radical, just in a different way. The FMK was radical in terms of thorough regime change, while Coexistence was radical regarding the national minority issue.

The word "democracy" was one of the most frequently used terms during the regime change. Traditionally, democracy is defined as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will" (Schumpeter 1943: 269). What is clear is that democracy cannot coexist with oppressive regimes. Yet, this left room for different interpretations. For example, Pál Csáky of the MKDM explained his view of democracy as follows: "We need to understand that democracy is in constant motion, a continuous struggle. The seemingly calm surface of functioning democracies is actually a balance of ongoing internal tensions. Democracy does not suppress this struggle; it encourages it, as it is one of its essential

elements. At the same time, unlike dictatorships, it offers everyone a chance to compete—the more humane a democracy, the more varied these opportunities become."[33]

No Hungarian party or public figure questioned the need to establish a democratic system to replace the communist regime, nor did they dispute the importance of representing and protecting minority rights. However, "the order of priorities sparked lengthy political debates among the Slovak Hungarians" (Öllös 2004: 57). The FMK's response to the question "Who are we?" was that "on the one hand, we are democrats, and on the other hand, we are Hungarians" (Öllös 2004: 57). This approach placed the two qualities side by side rather than prioritizing one over the other. László Gyurovszky, a spokesperson for the FMK, made it clear that democracy took precedence over the situation of the Hungarian minority when he stated: "Our starting point is democracy, not the position of the Hungarian minority. [...] The key priority now is to support democratization efforts in Slovakia. We firmly believe that parliamentary democracy is the only way to address and resolve problems and conflicts, as it allows for the free expression, articulation, and confrontation of interests."[34] This view was supported by the FMK's program, which integrates national rights with human and civil rights (Öllös 2004: 57).

This does not mean that the FMK undervalued minority rights. In fact, they emphasized that human rights, including national minority rights, can only be fully realized within a democratic framework. They believed that societal renewal should start with establishing a democratic state that upholds general human rights. Minority rights do not "automatically follow in a civil democracy, but a democratic system is the only place where they can be effectively protected."[35] Thus, "democracy is not an end in itself but a tool; it provides the space needed to protect our interests if we choose to. Establishing democracy is a national interest for the Slovak Hungarian minority. [...] Protecting minority rights can only succeed through the political mechanisms offered by democracy. We aimed to advance our rights protection work by engaging in the centers of political decision-making and avoiding marginalization in political life,"[36] Lajos Grendel explained in his writings.

Coexistence recognized the importance of building democracy, as outlined in its founding charter, approved at the inaugural assembly in Bratislava on March 31, 1990, which

33 Pál Csáky: Demokráciát? Igen! De milyet? (Democracy? Yes! But What Kind?), *Új Szó*, April 7, 1990, p. 4.

34 László Gyurovszky, FMK spokesperson: Mi nem autonómiára törekszünk! (We are not seeking autonomy!) The interview was conducted by Ildikó Haraszti, *Új Szó*, December 2, 1989, p. 4.

35 S. László Gyurovszky: Napjaink kisebbségi stratégiái (Current Minority Strategies), *Nap*, March 13, 1990, pp. 1–2.

36 Lajos Grendel: Választások előtt (Before the Elections), *Nap*, May 18, 1990, p. 4.

stated its commitment to "work for democracy and the rule of law." However, unlike the FMK, Coexistence prioritized a strong representation of minority rights. This focus arose from the belief that the FMK was not sufficiently active or effective in this area. For example, the rejection of Miklós Duray's ministerial appointment dealt a significant blow to the FMK's position to represent minority issues. Had this appointment been approved, Hungarian politics in Slovakia might have unfolded differently.

The need for a new party dedicated to defending the Hungarian minority therefore seemed justified, even though the FMK had addressed these issues from the start, albeit through its own approach. The founders of the new Hungarian parties felt that the FMK's efforts were insufficient. Coexistence saw this as a "gap in the market" that it could fill, along with an additional opportunity to advocate for the rights of other national minorities. Furthermore, intensifying interethnic tensions after January 1990, along with the shifting public sentiment, led some Hungarians in Slovakia to demand stronger protection for minority rights.

Before the establishment of Coexistence, Miklós Duray met with Hungarians from Rimavská Sobota, Lučenec, and Fiľakovo at a public forum between January 4 and 6, 1990. Citing their opinions, concerns, and expectations, he proposed the creation of a working committee to examine "how to effectively protect and politically represent national minorities within a multiparty system."[37] As mentioned above, at the Csemadok Presidium meeting on January 6, with Miklós Duray in attendance, there was strong support for creating a party that would "in a pluralistic society, aim to establish and protect the equal rights and collective rights of national minorities in [their] country."[38] This focus was on protecting not just the rights of the Hungarian minority but also those of other national minorities as well. Coexistence believed that Hungarian advocacy could not be separated from "the similar needs of other national minorities. Therefore, [it] believe[d] that this task should be undertaken together with other national minorities, along with the protection of the interests of the entire population, including the Slovaks, living in areas inhabited by national minorities."[39]

Duray saw this as the main difference between the FMK and Coexistence, and highlighted it in a statement on February 24, 1990: "The difference is that we want

37 Nemzetiségi kisebbségünk jogvédelméről (On the Protection of Our National Minority Rights), *Új Szó*, January 9, 1990, p. 8.

38 Kétnapos tanácskozás a Csemadok helyzetéről és jövőjéről (Two-Day Conference on the Situation and Future of Csemadok), *Új Szó*, January 8, 1990, pp. 1–2.

39 Source: [https://duray.sk/1990/05/epm-program/; https://duray.sk/1990/02/epm-alapitasa/]

Coexistence to be a movement not just for the Hungarian national minority but for all people in Slovakia living in areas where the majority and national minorities coexist. We aim to enforce international human rights, political, and civil rights agreements, including the resolution of the International Human Rights Federation on national minority rights from last January. Our goal is to ensure that these principles are upheld in Czechoslovakia through legislation. We want national minorities, alongside the Czechs and Slovaks, to feel that they are actively involved in shaping democratic conditions—not just as citizens of Czechoslovakia but as members of the national minorities as well."[40] He echoed this idea elsewhere: "One of our main objectives is to establish political norms for the mutual relations and coexistence of Hungarians, Slovaks, and other national minorities. This should be governed not only by principles but also by formal agreements."[41]

In fact, Duray did not view Coexistence as a national party, as one of his statements reveals: "I support party politics, but I do not see our political activity within a national party. Instead, I see it in a party that represents the interests of regions where Hungarians, Ukrainians, Germans, and possibly Poles live alongside Slovaks and Roma. We need to establish political norms for coexistence, protect the rights of national minorities, and safeguard the economic interests of these regions."[42] In today's terms, he envisioned a regional party.

Understanding that Coexistence aimed to enforce human rights documents begs the question: was it not their primary goal "to establish democratic conditions?" However, there is a key difference in perspective. Coexistence's program highlighted a crucial

40 János Mészáros: Hír van, memorandum nincs! (The News Is There but No Memorandum!), *Új Szó*, February 24, 1990, pp. 1–2. In February, Csemadok reached out to the Polish Cultural Association. Among other things, they presented "the formation of the Coexistence political movement, which, following the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act and the Vienna follow-up meeting, had taken on the legal representation of national minorities and ethnic groups. The movement also planned to participate in the elections that year, in line with party laws. Csemadok representatives stressed that Coexistence was open to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, political affiliation, or membership in other organizations. Representatives of the Polish association welcomed the news and expressed interest in connecting with the movement's founders." Lengyelek, magyarok - egy asztalnál (Poles, Hungarians—at the same table), *Új Szó*, February 16, 1990, p. 8. On March 31, 1990, at the founding assembly of Coexistence in Bratislava, Stanislaw Gawlik, the chief secretary of the Polish association, became Coexistence's vice president and was elected as a member of parliament in the first free elections under Coexistence banner.

41 Péter Miklósi: Interjú Duray Miklóssal (Interview with Miklós Duray), *Hét,* no. 12, March 23, 1990, p. 2.

42 József Mács: A látható Duray (The Visible Duray), *Hét*, no. 8. February 23, 1990, p. 7.

divergence from the FMK's position. While the FMK believed that democracy would guarantee minority rights—and that only democracy could do so—Coexistence argued that "democracy alone (if it functions in the traditional sense and follows the rule of the majority) [...] does not provide enough room for the legitimate interests of national minorities to be realized. It is a naïve illusion to think that these principles and systems will automatically solve the national minority issue and free minorities from the constraints of their status. The solution to the minority issue lies in legal protection for minorities alongside majority dominance. And this can only happen through proper political representation, laws, and binding agreements."[43]

In other words, we can conclude that Coexistence fully recognized the importance of establishing democracy. However, they had serious reservations about whether the FMK could effectively represent and protect minority rights within the new democratic framework. In fact, it was not just a doubt but rather a certainty, as Miklós Duray made clear in one of his statements: "Those who have represented the Hungarian community in Czechoslovakia in the Federal Assembly or the Slovak National Council so far either could not represent our interests or were unwilling to do so as needed."[44]

Iván Gyurcsík, the secretary-general of Coexistence, echoed this view: "Miklós Duray returned to Europe from the United States in November after more than a year and a half. In early December, when the negotiations for forming the federal government began, he participated in them. In January, after discussions in various towns and villages in southern Slovakia, he assessed the changing situation. There was a strong demand for a political movement to advocate for national minority rights. We were also motivated to act because we could not support the indiscriminate and harsh attacks on the institutions of the Hungarian community in Czechoslovakia, nor could we agree with certain discriminatory aspects of the electoral law. While our goals are the same, we see a different path to achieving them. This is why Miklós Duray founded the Coexistence political movement, a step that was only natural in the emerging democracy."[45]

43 Source: [https://duray.sk/1990/05/epm-program/]

44 János Mészáros: Ki képviseljen bennünket? Sajátos parlamenti képviselet kell. Beszélgetés dr. Duray Miklóssal, az Együttélés politikai mozgalom elnökével (Who Should Represent Us? We Need Special Parliamentary Representation. A Conversation with Dr. Miklós Duray, President of Coexistence Political Movement), *Új Szó*, April 2, 1990, pp. 2–3.

45 Gyula Bodnár, József Szilvássy, László Zsilka: Különböző utakon nemzeti kisebbségünk jogaiért, érdekeink képviseletéért. Kerekasztal-beszélgetés a magyar politikai mozgalmak képviselőivel (Different Paths for Representing Our Minority Rights and Interests: A Roundtable Discussion with Representatives of Hungarian Political Movements), *Új Szó*, May 25, 1990, pp. 4–5.

The situation was further complicated by the FMK's stance: although they actively and strongly addressed minority issues from the outset, they consistently emphasized that their priority was achieving democracy, not minority rights. Moreover, their approach to managing the escalating interethnic tensions neither helped nor harmed their position.

The MKDM aligned with Coexistence on this fault line. Kálmán Janics, the president of the MKDM, also found the FMK's approach to minority rights unsatisfactory. In his view, as expressed in the following statement, the MKDM was formed due to the insufficient representation of minority rights: "By the end of January, it became clear to me that there was no genuine interest from Slovak political movements or the emerging parties in objectively addressing issues concerning national minorities. [...] Over the past few months, I have repeatedly stressed that we expect to hear at least as much about our minority rights, cultural and educational self-governance, and true equality as Alexander Dubček, the then-communist leader, promised in his party's action program in April 1968. Until we see signs of this, our distrust is justified. This is why the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement came into being."[46]

The central issue, when considering the dilemma of being either democrats or Hungarians, was that both Coexistence and the MKDM—but particularly Coexistence—saw FMK as not sufficiently Hungarian. The FMK's decision to run on the VPN's list in the first free elections made them seem almost like traitors in Coexistence's eyes. Conversely, from the FMK's perspective, Coexistence appeared overly nationalistic and too focused on Hungarian identity. This marked the beginning of the long-standing debate over who were the good Hungarians and bad Hungarians. At the same time, in Slovak political circles and public opinion, Coexistence was viewed as the minority protection party, which, in their interpretation, meant a nationalist, even chauvinistic and irredentist, Hungarian party. Although some Slovaks saw the FMK in a similar light, it was not to the same degree as Coexistence. This mistrust was one of the causes that made it difficult for Slovaks to fully trust Coexistence.

Károly Tóth's statement made on February 21, 1990, is noteworthy in this context: "The FMK does not want to obsess over being Hungarian. For us, it is simply a matter of our existence. So far, two Hungarian political forces have emerged: the FMK and the Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement (while the Hungarian Student Association remained an advocacy group). Neither denied their Hungarian identity, and neither made it an issue in political life. Interestingly, both parties clearly defined their political stances, and neither faced significant accusations of being too Hungarian by 'the

46 Péter Miklósi: Interjú Janics Kálmánnal (Interview with Kálmán Janics), *Hét*, no. 29, July 20, 1990.

Slovak side.' However, many accuse us of collaborating with the Slovaks. I must say, there is no real answer to such accusations. It is difficult to argue with primitiveness, demagoguery, and rumors, especially when they stem from nationalistic fervor. (As Miklós Szabó writes, for the nationalist mindset, there is no such thing as 'otherness'—only a lack of nationalism or outright national betrayal.) We do not want to make a big issue out of this because defending ourselves would only mean trying to prove that we are indeed Hungarian. We already know that, and trying to convince them would be futile. We greatly respect Coexistence's principles. Since November 17, we too have been striving to coexist with other political forces and nationalities. How much this needs to be politically emphasized is something we already discussed back in early December in Prague with Mr. Pavel Muraško, head of the Civic Forum's nationalities department, whom we respect as the father of this idea. We have also had several discussions on this matter with Miklós Duray."[47]

The party's spokespeople reiterated this stance during a press conference after the FMK's first general assembly. When asked about their relationship with Coexistence, they responded that they "see no value in forming parties based on nationality affiliation."[48]

47 József Szilvássy: Az első közgyűlés előtt. Beszélgetés Tóth Károllyal, a Független Magyar Kezdeményezés szóvivőjével (Before the First General Assembly. Interview with Károly Tóth, spokesperson of the Independent Hungarian Initiative), *Új Szó*, February 21, 1990, p. 4.

48 Már a választások jegyében. Megtartotta első országos közgyűlését a Független Magyar Kezdeményezés (Already in the spirit of elections. The Independent Hungarian Initiative held its first national assembly). *Új Szó*, February 26, 1990, pp. 1–2.

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