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EXPLAINING THE LIMITED SUCCESS OF THE COMMUNIST-SUCCESSOR LEFT IN SLOVAKIA

The Case of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ)

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ABSTRACT

Most of the literature on communist-successor parties has focused on their successful return to power in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. This article aims to contribute to the wealth of knowledge on communist-successor parties by focusing on the limited success of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ) in Slovakia. Although the role of the party during the revolution and its immediate aftermath (1989–90) is shown to be important in shaping the chances for SDĽ, the distorting role played by another party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), and the strategic errors committed by the SDĽ leadership also played their part in the party's fortunes during the 1990s and help explain SDĽ's ignominious removal from parliament in 2002 when the party gained a paltry 1.36 percent of the vote. The article concludes by drawing the factors together in a modified path-dependent explanation.

KEY WORDS ■ Communist-successor parties ■ path-dependency ■ Slovakia

Introduction

One of the most striking aspects of the 2002 Slovak parliamentary elections was the collapse in support for the communist-successor party, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ) which failed to cross the 5 percent threshold, managing to muster a mere 1.36 percent of the vote. The party's derisory showing in the 2002 elections, but also SDĽ's failure throughout the 1990s, is in stark contrast to its counterparts in Poland and Hungary. The turn-around of the Polish successor party, Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland, for example, was 'stunning' (Gryzmała-Busse, 2002: 3). After the

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party lost every seat it could in the semi-free elections of June 1989, as part of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) the party went on to win the parliamentary elections only four years later, catapulting the party back into government. Although SLD lost power as a result of the 1997 elections it gained votes; a trend which continued in 2001 when SLD won the parliamentary elections with 41 percent of the vote and became the main party in government. Such success was not just the monopoly of the Poles. The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP) won the April 1994 elections with 33 percent of the vote and became the leading party in government. Although the MSzP lost the 1998 election, the party's share of the vote held up (32.3 percent). After four years in opposition, victory in the 2002 poll (winning 46 percent of the vote) returned MSzP to power.

A number of explanations have been provided to account for the 'political comeback' of the communist-successor parties (Ishiyama and Bozóki, 2001: 33). Initial attempts to explain the success of SLD, for instance, saw the party's success as a product of the electorate's reaction to the tough economic package introduced by Finance Minister, Leszek Balcerowicz (Mahr and Nagle, 1995). The reaction thesis, however, provided a plausible explanation for why governing parties fell out of favour, 'but not why certain parties capitalise on reaction while others do not' (Orenstein, 1998: 472).

There have been two notable attempts to explain the varying degrees of success enjoyed by the communist-successor parties in East Central Europe (Gryzmała-Busse, 2002; Orenstein, 1998). Orenstein laid stress on a genealogy of the communist-successor parties themselves. He argued that there were two important stages: firstly, between 1988 and 1990 when either the hardliners or reformers took control of the party; and secondly, if the latter had taken over the party, whether the reformists were able to forge a strong alliance with the trade unions. Gryzmała-Busse takes a slightly different approach, positing a strongly path-dependent explanation. She lays great stress on the existence of pragmatic elites in the higher echelons of the Polish and Hungarian parties in the late 1980s who centralized party structures, forced a rapid break with the Communist Party's past and developed a responsive social democratic appeal. For her, the role played by the Communist Parties in the 1989 revolution and their immediate aftermath is central to explaining the subsequent success of SLD in Poland and MSzP in Hungary.

In this article, however, I argue that although both these accounts can help to explain the limited success of SDĽ, neither satisfactorily explains the Slovak case. In order to understand the relative failure of SDĽ, what is required is not just an appreciation of the role of the Communist Parties in the 1989 revolutions, but also an appreciation of both the distortions in Slovak party politics, particularly the role played by Slovakia's most popular party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), and the strategic errors made by SDĽ's leadership.

The Communist Party and the 1989 Revolution

In contrast to the existence of pragmatic elites in the higher echelons of the Polish and Hungarian Communist Parties in the late 1980s, many of the highest ranking officials in the Slovak Communist Party (KSS), and the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) of which it was a constituent part, were elevated to top positions thanks to their articulation of orthodox Communist rhetoric during the post-Prague Spring normalization (Williams, 1997). The language of reform was to them a threat to their position not, as amongst Polish and Hungarian Communists, an opportunity to bolster their power. The language of reform, however, was not completely absent from KSS during the 1980s. Far away from both party supervision and decision-making, the then Young Turks from the Bratislava-based Institute of Marxism–Leninism, Peter Weiss and Pavol Kanis, had organized seminars to discuss the social and economic problems of society in the pre-revolutionary period, where those with 'non-conforming opinions' were invited (Žiak, 1996: 29). In November and December 1989 they came to the fore, representing the Party during television discussions and pressing both for radical change within the Party and the distancing of KSS from KSČ (Weiss, 2000; Žiak, 1996).

Weiss and the reformers took control of the Executive Committee of the Party's Central Committee in January 1990, strengthening their position at the October conference in Prešov when the Central Committee pushed through a new social democratic programme, re-elected Weiss as chair of the Executive Committee and enacted a symbolic change to the name of the party, (KSS–SDĽ), with the leadership authorized to drop the name KSS at the appropriate moment, which it did at the beginning of 1991. Weiss's faction pushed through centralizing measures, not just by reducing the size of the Central Committee from 260 to 90 at the Prešov Congress, but by disbanding regional committees and reducing local committees to the status of merely coordinating bodies. By early 1990 an 11-member team had been created to 'transmit' Central Committee directives to the regional organizations to ensure implementation (Gryzmała-Busse, 2002: 94).

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to overemphasize the strength of Weiss's faction even in 1990. As Katz and Mair have argued, '[p]arty organizations do not begin ex novo, but are inherited by party leaders, and although these leaders can attempt to effect major reforms and innovations within the organizations they inherit, there are nevertheless clear limits to the capacity for change' (2002: 127). In contrast to reformers inside the Polish and Hungarian Communist Parties, such as Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Imre Pozsgay who had high-ranking Party careers behind them in 1989, Weiss and Kanis were minor figures inside KSS before the revolution. Indeed at the January 1990 conference, when Weiss was chosen to become leader, he was not even an official delegate. Weiss attended thanks to the patronage of Viliam Plezva his boss at the Marxism–Leninism Institute. Weiss's

faction took control of the higher echelons of the party, but failed to take control of the party at large. The tension between the intellectual modernizing leadership and the old membership base, particularly the 'apparat', was to be a recurrent theme of SDĽ's travails throughout the 1990s.

Arguably there was one reformist with a high-ranking career who could have offered leadership to the Slovak left in 1990–1. Although a man from a different era, the leader of the 1968 Czechoslovak Spring, Alexander Dubček, was a figure of international standing and probably the only Slovak politician with any significant profile outside Czechoslovakia in 1989/90. Dubček's failure of leadership to unify the left stemmed from two factors. Firstly, despite his desire to be informed of every new piece of news and personnel change in the international social democratic movement, he missed crucial meetings of the nascent Slovak Social Democratic Party (SDSS) and was keen to stress that, although he was a social democrat, he was not a party servant (Maxa, 1998: 179). Secondly, he declared his opposition to the proposed merger between the SDSS (which had no Communist past) and SLD, describing it as 'unacceptable' (p. 189). Dubček failed to offer any lead to the left, but merely made critical remarks of those, like Weiss, who tried to unify the left.

Clearly, as Orenstein and Gryzmała-Busse argued, the revolutionary period is important. The lack of a strong, pragmatic elite able to drive through change hindered the reformists' aim of transforming the party along the lines of the Polish and Hungarian examples. The role of the Slovak Communists during the transition affected their performance at the ballot box in both 1990 and 1992, but the argument loses its punch if the revolution is used to explain SDĽ's fortunes in 1994, 1998 and 2002. Indeed, if we were to transport ourselves back to 1992, we would probably not judge SDĽ to be a failure. What shaped SDĽ's fortunes in the 1990s was the distorting role played by HZDS and the strategic errors committed by the party's leadership.

The Role Played by the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and Other Distortions to Party Politics in Slovakia

The work of Markowski (1997), Krause (2000), Krivý (2001) and others has shown that the left/centre-left constituency in Slovakia is of the same proportion as in Hungary and Poland. What appears clear is that SDĽ has been unable to capture that vote. Part of an explanation for that must lie with the party's own decisions, to which I shall return to below. The success of a party is also, in part, a product of the successes and failures of other parties. In the SDĽ's case, the distorting role played by HZDS has been significant in shaping the party's fortunes.

Table 1. Parliamentary election results (% of the popular vote) of SDĽ and its rivals[1]

	1992	*1994*	*1998*	*2002*
Slovakia				
SDĽ	14.70	10.41*	14.66	1.36
Other notable left/left-leaning parties:				
KSS	0.76	2.72	2.79	6.32
ZRS	–	7.34	1.30	0.54
SOP	–	–	8.01	–
Smer	–	–	–	13.46
SDA	–	–	–	1.79
Slovakia most popular party:				
HZDS	37.26	34.96**	27.00	19.50
	1991	*1993*	*1997*	*2001*
Poland (elections to the Lower House)				
SLD	11.99	20.41	27.13	40.01***
	1990	*1994*	*1998*	*2002*
Hungary				
MSzP****	10.89	32.99	32.92	42.05

*In 1994, SDĽ formed the mainstay of the Common Choice coalition incorporating three other much smaller parties: the Green Party of Slovakia, the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia and the Farmers' Movement.
**In 1994, HZDS formed an electoral coalition with the small Agrarian Party of Slovakia.
***In 2001, SLD formed an electoral coalition with the Union of Labour.
****Results from the first round.
[1]Based on data from the Slovak Statistical Office's website (www.statistics.sk) and the Essex election archive (http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections).

Before embarking on an explanation of HZDS's role in the Slovak polity, two other factors deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, there are around half a million ethnic Hungarians living in Southern Slovakia, constituting around a tenth of the Slovak Republic's population. These citizens tend to vote *en masse* for the ethnic Hungarian parties (e.g. Krivý et al., 1996). Because SDĽ, could not bridge the ethnic cleavage in Slovakia and attract Hungarian voters, its share of the overall total is artificially low, as it is garnered from only 85–90 percent of the population.

Secondly, any attempt to explain electoral success necessarily invokes discussions on the role of electoral systems in determining electoral outcomes (see e.g. Rae, 1967; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). Although the electoral systems were subject to change in East Central Europe (ECE) during the 1990s (for details of the Slovak case see Malová, 2001: 352–5; and Rybář, 2000: 2–5), in terms of assessing the impact of electoral systems

on the fortunes of the left in ECE, thresholds appear important (Moraski and Loewenberg, 1999). In Poland, for example, thresholds brought in after the fractious 1991–3 parliament magnified the success of the former Communists and the Polish Peasants Party which won nearly two-thirds of the seats on just 36 percent of the vote, thanks in no small part to the 35 percent of votes cast for parties that failed to cross the threshold (Kaminski, 2002; Szczerbiak, 2001: 20). The lower share of wasted votes in Slovakia, however, meant SDĽ benefited less than its Polish counterpart, although it is worth stressing that the impact of thresholds in Poland for the 1993 elections is a one-shot deal, which does not explain the subsequent strong performance of SLD in Poland.

The threshold also has a psychological impact on voters not wishing to waste their vote (Benoit, 2002; Duverger, 1963). There is no hard statistical proof, but anecdotally it appears clear that in the 2002 parliamentary elections some left-wing voters decided not to back SDĽ and the breakaway Social Democratic Alternative (discussed below) for fear of voting for a party which would not cross the 5 percent threshold. Moreover, the threshold did not act as a sufficient deterrent to the fragmentation of parties on the left. The Slovak left did not undergo the amalgamation achieved in Poland in the early 1990s, in part because of the absence of a figure like Kwaśniewski to manage the process.

For comparative purposes it is also important to highlight Hungary's complicated mixed electoral system. The list element does provide 'an element of proportional *correction*' (Farrell, 2001: 118), but the Hungarian communist-successor party, MSzP, benefits from the constituency element thanks to being a large party and because its local candidates are well-known middle-aged men, which appeals to the Hungarian voters' palates.

HZDS has been Slovakia's most successful party since its creation in 1991 thanks to an ideology and support base centred on managed economic reform, a rhetoric and concern for those who lost out from the process of marketization, and the charisma and personality of its leader and founder, Vladimír Mečiar (Haughton, 2001) all articulated in what a leading HZDS figure described as a 'national accent' (Baco, 2000). HZDS won support by articulating a demand for greater autonomy (but not independence) at the June 1992 elections. (SDĽ, in contrast, ran a much more pro-federal campaign.) After winning the election, Mečiar and his counterpart in the Czech part of the federal state, Václav Klaus, could only agree on the nuclear option of terminating Czechoslovakia's existence. From late 1992 onwards Mečiar liked to portray himself as the father of the nation and his political opponents as enemies of the Slovak nation (Leško, 1996; Mečiar, 2000). Such rhetoric, plus the policies of the 1994–8 HZDS-led government, when it played fast and loose with constitutional niceties and democratic norms, helped foster a dichotomized Slovak polity.

HZDS's programme of managed economic reform was central to its

appeal in the 1990s and was a deliberate strategy to tap into the large section (around 40 percent) of self-described 'centrist' voters (Krivý, 2001: 152). HZDS advocated market reforms, but emphasized the 'social aspect' of the market (Haughton, 2001; HZDS, 1992, 1994; Williams, 2000: 4–8). Such language was strikingly similar to SDĽ's. At SDĽ's inaugural conference, for example, the party called for privatization, 'which is linked to the least amount of social losses' (SDĽ, 1992: 18). There was overlap, but not replication. Stress on solidarity, social justice and the promotion of the health and economic well-being of working people was at the core of SDĽ's declarations (SLD, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1998a, b, c), whereas HZDS accentuated the Slovak nation (HZDS, 1992, 1994). What is important is the reception of these appeals. Sizeable sections of two groups whom we might have expected would have been fertile support territory for the communist-successor party in Slovakia, those with an equivocal attitude to the process of marketization and those nostalgic for Communist times, voted HZDS (Bútorová and Bútora, 1994: 32; Evans and Whitefield, 1998: 131).

HZDS policy towards the trade unions also diluted SDĽ's support base. Before turning to HZDS's role, it is worth returning to Orenstein's model. His two-stage model laid great stress on the role of unions, which helped the parties to 'put down roots in society and build electoral allegiance among both elites and the majority of the population' (Orenstein, 1998: 491). In Poland, SLD benefited from strong links with the All Poland Trade Union Alliance (OPZZ). In the 1993–7 parliament, around a third of SLD deputies were nominated by OPZZ (Orenstein, 1998: 491). The links were also strong in Hungary. Trade unionists, including the president of the National Federation of Hungarian Trade Unions, for instance, also ran on the MSzP's party list in 1994 (Orenstein, 1998: 491).

Gryzmała-Busse, in contrast, downplays the role of unions, arguing that the 'victorious Hungarian and Polish parties were not dependent on union support' (2002: 184–5). She provides statistics to show that the 'party support from union members' was consistently higher in the Czech and Slovak case than in Hungary and Poland (p. 185). Such an argument is problematic, however, because one would expect the more successful parties to draw their support from a wider cross section of society.

In the Slovak case, the possibility of institutionalized trade union support helping to integrate working class voters and activists into SDĽ, however, was hampered by HZDS's trade union policy. In 1992–3, under the leadership of a Mečiar ally, the Trade Union Confederation (KOZ) was *de facto* controlled by HZDS. By 1994 KOZ had changed slightly, allowing individual unions to nominate union officials onto the candidate lists not just of SDĽ's Common Choice electoral alliance (of which more later), but also of a range of other parties including HZDS (Malová, 1999a: 144). By 1996, when KOZ had fallen under the leadership of Ivan Saktor and was seen by ministers as too anti-government (Kalman, 2000; Keltošová, 2000), the

government set up a rival organization, the Trade Union Association (ZOZ), which boasted 48,000 workers in 1997/8 compared to 843,000 for KOZ in 1998 (Malová, 1999b: 123, 126). It would be incorrect, however, to place too much emphasis on the negative role of ZOZ in diminishing SDĽ's support, not least because SDĽ gained more votes in 1998 when ZOZ was at its strongest. Nevertheless, the lack of a strong link between the unions and SDĽ in the early and mid-1990s deprived the party of a potentially strong left-leaning support base.

The dichotomization of the Slovak polity engendered by the 1994–8 HZDS-led government thanks to a combination of nationalist policies, a series of murky privatization deals, a disregard for the constitutional niceties of democratic politics and the deteriorating image of the country held by international organizations such as NATO and the European Union, had profound implications for SDĽ. Firstly, under strong international pressure SDĽ resisted the temptation to join HZDS in a coalition government after the 1994 elections, choosing instead to join the opposition. More significantly, however, the actions of the 1994–8 HZDS-led government, which had caused the EU's rejection of Slovakia on political grounds at the Luxembourg summit in 1997 (Henderson, 1999), and the desire of the then opposition to put Slovakia's accession to the EU back on track, led to the decision to join the government in 1998. It is worth stressing that SDĽ was also under extreme pressure from its sister parties in the Party of European Socialists.

Strategic Errors/Failure of Leadership

The nature of electoral competition, particularly the role played by HZDS, provides an element of an explanation of SDĽ's level of support since the party's creation. Any full account of the party's travails, however, needs to incorporate an understanding of critical events and fateful decisions which shaped SDĽ's role and popularity in independent Slovakia. Space precludes an examination of all the strategic errors, but three deserve to be highlighted: the decision to push for early elections in 1994, the creation of the Common Choice electoral coalition and the decision to take the finance portfolio in both 1994 and 1998.

Dispute within the ranks of HZDS and its coalition allies, SNS, led to the collapse of the second Mečiar-led government in March 1994. The new government, including SDĽ, could have remained in place until the end of the parliamentary term, i.e. June 1996, but the decision was made to push for early elections. In retrospect, this decision appears to have been a major mistake. When Jozef Moravčík, Roman Kováč and fellow defectors from HZDS helped form a new government, they were not keen on calling new elections, fearing early elections would be 'risky' for their new party (Moravčík, 2001). Pressure for early elections had come from SDĽ, buoyed

in part by the success of the communist-successor parties in Poland and Hungary. As the then leader of SDĽ, Peter Weiss, has subsequently admitted, the party's poor showing at the polls had much to do with the failure not to push for either immediate elections in March 1994 or wait until June 1996 (Weiss, 2000). The disappointing election results paved the way for Weiss's departure from the leadership and his replacement by Jozef Migaš in 1996.

Weiss also conceded, however, that SDĽ's performance at the ballot box was also, in part, the product of the loss of the party's identity in the Common Choice coalition of leftish parties (Weiss, 2000). SDĽ had hoped to 'broaden its appeal' by forming an electoral coalition involving three smaller parties which, it was thought in party circles, would 'add far from insignificant percentage points' to SDĽ's support: the Green Party of Slovakia, the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia and the Farmers' Movement (Wightman, 1995: 386). The party succeeded, however, only in muddying the party's image and programme in the mind of the electorate.

The third fateful decision of 1994 (and repeated in 1998) was SDĽ's acceptance of control of the finance ministry. Finance portfolios can be poisoned chalices, particularly for left-leaning parties in transitional economies. In Poland and Hungary the underlying consensus of the need to undertake radical marketization policies amongst all the major political actors mitigated many of the possible negative consequences the former communists may have incurred. In contrast, the decision of the SDĽ leadership to push for the finance ministry in both the short-lived Moravčík government and in the 1998–2002 coalition had portentous consequences. The mixture of the decision to get the finance portfolio in 1994 and push for early elections was, if not a lethal cocktail, then a debilitating one (Leško, 2000: 176–7). The new Finance Minister SDĽ's Brigita Schmögnerová believed it was her job to try to reverse the country's parlous economic position, which included a tough fiscal package to reduce Slovakia's 26 billion crowns ($0.5 billion) budget deficit. As she later noted, 'we won half a year, but lost the next four' (Leško, 2000: 177).

The need to administer powerful medicine to an ailing patient was even more acute in 1998. Schmögnerová's finance policy was lauded by the international financial community, earning the respect of rating agencies such as Fitch for restoring Slovakia's macroeconomic stability (Fitch, 2001) and winning plaudits and prizes such as Euromoney's Finance Minister of the Year in 2000. A reform package, which included increases in rents and fuel, may have pleased the international financial community and helped pave the way for Slovakia's entry into the OECD, but almost inevitably it was unpopular at home. SDĽ's support plummeted from 16.3 percent in December 1998 to just 5.1 percent by April 2001 (Krivý and Meseznikov, 2001: 82, 87–8).

The distorting role played by HZDS can be factored in here. The decision to go into government with right-wingers in both 1994 and 1998 was the

product of HZDS's position as Slovakia's most popular party. Because of HZDS support among the electorate, in order to keep the nationalists and authoritarians (HZDS and its allies) out of government, left and right were forced to form a coalition of the ideologically diverse.

The decision to enter government with right and centre-right parties in both 1994 and 1998 and taking the finance portfolio in both governments is central to explaining internal tensions in the party. Two examples are illustrative of these tensions. Firstly, disgusted with the failure of the party to represent working people's interests, one of SDĽ's most popular politicians, Ján Ľupták, left the party shortly before the 1994 elections and created a new party, the Workers' Association of Slovakia (ZRS). Thanks in part to Ľupták's personal popularity, ZRS took 7.34 percent of the vote. Ľupták took voters from SDĽ, but a strong cadre of hardliners remained in the SDĽ leadership. Secondly, the tensions between the reformists and hardliners came to a head in early 2002 when fearing electoral disaster the less reform-minded faction led by the new party's leader (elected in November 2001), Pavel Koncoš, called for the sacking of Schmögnerová. While Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda publicly defended his cabinet colleague, her own party colleagues called for her to go. After initial reluctance, she duly obliged in February 2002. The tensions between Schmögnerová, Weiss and Ftáčnik on the one hand and Pavol Koncoš and his allies on the other cannot simply be categorized as one of an ideological difference between those of a 'social democratic' disposition and hardline leftists. The dispute had as much to do with personalities, but also centred on Slovakia's place in the world. The Weiss–Ftáčnik faction placed Slovakia's entry into international organizations, particularly the EU, at the top of their agenda, whereas for Koncoš and Migaš ideological purity at times overrode concern for the resultant impact on Slovakia's integration process. Schmögnerová's dismissal led to Peter Weiss, Milan Ftáčnik and Schmögnerová leaving the party and forming the Social Democratic Alternative (SDA).

It would be unfair to load onto Schmögnerová's shoulders all of the blame for SDĽ's demise from the 1998 election onwards. The party lost support thanks to the less than convincing explanations given by Defence Minister Pavol Kanis of how he had managed to fund construction of his home on a ministerial salary alone, the party's shady links with a bank, *Devin Banka*, and the clientelistic activities of the SDĽ nominated head of Slovak Electricity, Stefan Košovan. Such scandals helped create an image of a party full of politicians keener to feather their own nests than improve the lot of ordinary working Slovaks. To be fair to SDĽ this was an accusation thrown at almost all political parties in the country and used to great effect by Robert Fico, a former vice-chairman of the party who had left after failing to secure a position in the 1998–2002 government, when launching his new party Smer in 1999 with his rhetoric of 'new faces' and a 'new direction' (Haughton, 2002). Smer won 13.46 percent of the vote in 2002. Of those who voted SDĽ in 1998, 25.3 percent voted for Smer four years later

(www.evolby.sme.sk). Smer's success can be ascribed to a combination of factors. Fico himself is a young, charismatic and popular politician who was quick to exploit the 'political opportunity structure' (Lucardie, 2000) by projecting his party as a new entity, which left the polarized (Mečiarite versus anti-Mečiarite) Slovak polity behind, eschewing ideological politics and trumpeting the need for strong pragmatic policies (Haughton, 2003). Fico also made a pitch for the modern centre-left vote by re-branding his party as Smer-Third Way in December 2001. What both the examples of Fico and Ľupták highlight, in contrast to the Polish and Hungarian communist-successor parties, is SDĽ's inability to avoid damaging splits.

SDĽ's participation in the government also lost the party support to the party's erstwhile comrades from KSČ days in the 2002 election. The unreconstructed Communists who had refused to follow Weiss and Kanis in 1989–91, forming instead a new party with a familiar name, the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), crossed the 5 percent threshold by articulating a traditional hardline communist programme, albeit one tinged with an acceptance of EU membership (Haughton, 2003).

Conclusion

The role played by the Communist Party in the transition, the distorting impact of HZDS on Slovak party politics and strategic errors committed by SDĽ all play their part in explaining SDĽ's level of success during the 1990s. The task for future research may be to see whether these factors can be fused into a path-dependent explanation.

Path-dependent approaches to the transformations in post-communist Europe have already generated a large body of literature (e.g. Johnson, 2001; Stark and Bruszt, 1998). Clearly, the mode of extrication affected the political environment in the immediate post-revolutionary period. Path-dependent explanations, however, downgrade the role of agency. Nevertheless, agency can be incorporated into a broadly path-dependent approach, using the idea of critical junctures. Such junctures become critical because 'once a particular option is selected it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available' (Mahoney, 2000: 513).

The events of 1989–90 and the inability of the reformists to take complete control of SDĽ in that period (itself largely shaped by 1968 and normalization) in combination with the constitutional imbroglio into which Czechoslovakia was plunged in 1990–2 and the HZDS-led solution set SDĽ on a path. At critical junctures, however, the SDĽ leadership took decisions which took the party first along rockier roads and then to a dead-end.

The most important of these critical junctures was the decision taken in spring 1994 to opt for early elections rather than continue until the end of the four-year parliamentary term. Misguided by the level of popular support

for SLD in Poland and MSzP in Hungary and bolstered by opinion polling in Slovakia, the SDĽ leadership thought the party would perform well in early elections. It remains in the realm of speculation, but if immediate elections had been called in March 1994 when Mečiar lost the parliamentary vote of no confidence, it seems reasonable to assert that SDĽ would probably have done better, not least because the new breakaway faction from HZDS was a nascent party without the structure and organization to run an effective campaign and HZDS itself was the governing party. The decision to delay elections until the autumn, however, was damaging to SDĽ's fortunes. Although the SDĽ leadership had hoped participation in the Moravčík government would accord the party 'respectability' amongst sections of the electorate (Wightman, 1995: 386), the government's package of austerity measures went down like a lead balloon amongst potential SDĽ voters. The decision provoked Ľupták to form ZRS which garnered no fewer than 7.3 percent of the vote in the autumn elections and strengthened HZDS in the east of Slovakia, where SDĽ had done well in 1992 (Krivý et al., 1996: 101).

The 1994 elections brought a coalition of HZDS, ZRS and the hardline nationalists to power. Thanks to murky privatization deals, a disrespect for the rights of ethnic minorities and a disregard for the constitutional niceties of democratic politics, the 1994–8 government sullied the name of Slovakia in international circles and caused both NATO and the EU to reject the country's advances. Slovakia was only resurrected thanks to a broad-based coalition, including SDĽ, formed after the 1998 elections. Although the 1998–2002 government led Slovakia towards NATO and EU membership, and more generally towards international rehabilitation, the decision of the SDĽ leadership to take the finance portfolio, and hence become the public face of painful economic reform, not only caused the party's popularity to fall, but exacerbated internal tensions within SDĽ leading ultimately to its derisory result in the 2002 elections.

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