

The Slovak Nationalist Movement in the Early 20th Century in Local Contexts

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Generally, in the discourse of nationalist politics, a specific “nation” is regarded as the basic unit of interest. In other words, this “national interpretational framework” tends to reduce social conflicts of interest to the conflicts between those fixed or substantial national units. However, if we want to explore the motives of the people’s support for the nationalist movement more analytically, we should not use this simplifying framework. According to John Breuilly, “the first and most obvious requirement of any project to study ‘popular nationalism’ or ‘nationalism from below’ is an empirical one”, so it is necessary to “look for sources that will provide the direct evidence needed to probe popular attitude and motives”¹. By paying more attention to the social, political, and cultural contexts in local communities, we might demonstrate that there existed complex causes of the people’s support for the nationalist movement that cannot be explained only by such a national framework.

For this purpose, in this paper we investigate the picture of the people’s support for the Slovak nationalist movement in the early twentieth century by focusing on specific local contexts, especially on the relationship between Catholic priests as local agents of the movement and their parishioners.

Development of the Slovak Nationalist Movement in the Early 20th Century

The Slovak nationalist movement claimed the existence of the “Slovak nation” as a collective subject of rights composed of the Slovak-speaking inhabitants of Upper Hungary. Its political activity was aimed to acquire those national rights, especially linguistic rights in the public sphere. Therefore, in principle, nationalist politics at that time emphasized the unity of the “Slovak nation” or “Slovaks” in common interests, which had been ignored or “oppressed” by linguistic Magyarization in public and educational institutions as a state-integration policy of the Kingdom of Hungary. However, the people who were regarded as a single “Slovak nation” according to linguistic criteria were divided in terms of confession. It was Catholics that constituted a majority (70.3% in 1900), but there existed also Lutherans to some extent (23.7%).² The majority of leaders of the Slovak nationalist movement in the nineteenth century were Lutheran clergymen or intellectuals, though they were a minority among Slovak

¹ Breuilly, J., “What Does It Mean to Say that Nationalism Is ‘Popular’?”, in: Van Ginderachter, M., Beyen, M. (eds.), *Nationhood from Below: Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 24.

² In addition, there were Greek Catholics (5.0%), Calvinists (0.5%), Jews (0.5%), and others. Stodola, E., *Štatistika Slovenska*, T. S. Martin, 1912, s. 37.

speakers. In 1871 they founded the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana) as the political party that represented the Slovak nationalist movement. However, their political influence on general Slovak speakers was very faint and the Slovak National Party did not manage to win any seats in the Diet of Hungary until 1901.

Under those circumstances, new factions aimed at garnering greater support of the Slovak speakers were formed within the Slovak nationalist movement at the end of the nineteenth century: namely, the so-called “Hlasists” composed of secular-liberal nationalists influenced by Czech philosopher Tomáš Masaryk; and the Catholic-oriented nationalists separated from the Catholic People’s Party (Katolikus Néppárt), which was a countrywide Catholic political party in Hungary.³ The latter especially was dominated by local priests, who had a large influence on Catholic parishioners as the majority in Upper Hungary. Thus, this group had more potential to broaden its popular support base than the Slovak National Party led by Lutheran intellectuals or than the secularist Hlasists.⁴

The Slovak nationalist movement became more active during the political crisis of 1905-1906 in the Kingdom of Hungary, that is the destabilization of domestic politics as a result of defeat of the ruling Liberal Party (Szabadelvű Párt) in diet elections. Especially, activities of Catholic priests who left the Catholic People’s Party due to its indifference to the cause of Slovak nationalists were remarkable. For instance, the head (župan/ispán) of Prešporok (Hung. Pozsony) County, where support for the Slovak nationalist movement was spreading to a large extent, reported to the Interior Minister in October 1905 that 31 out of 42 of the major activists of the movement were Catholic priests.⁵ Those priests played leading roles not only in the religious lives of their parishioners, but also in local public institutions such as municipal boards or various associations. Therefore, sometimes they could exert large political influence on local inhabitants. A representative example of those priests was Andrej Hlinka, parish priest of Ružomberok (Hung. Rózsashegy) and later charismatic leader of the Catholic-

³ On the Catholic People’s Party, see: Popély, J., “Zichyho strana a nacionálno-klerikálne hnutie na Slovensku v rokoch 1895-1905”, *Historický časopis* 26 (1978), 4, s. 581-609; Popély, J., “Vzťah medzi štátom a cirkvou v poslednej tretine 19. storočia a korene politického klerikalizmu v Uhorsku”, *Historické štúdie* 24 (1980), s. 77-93; Popély, J., “Boj o liberálne cirkevnopolitické reformy v Uhorsku a založenie Katolíckej ľudovej strany”, *Historický časopis* 29 (1981), 6, s. 857-875; Szabó, D., “A magyar Néppárt „hosszú menetelése”. A politikai katolicizmus előtörténetéről”, *Társadalmi szemle*, 1991/8-9, 123-131.

⁴ On these factions in the Slovak national movement, see: Podrimavský, M., *Slovenská národná strana v druhej polovici 19. Storočia*, Bratislava, 1983; Klobucký, R., *Hlasistické hnutie: národ a sociológia*, Bratislava, 2006; Letz, R., Mulík, P. (eds.), *Pohľady na osobnosť Andreja Hlinku*, Martin, 2009; Bakoš, V., *Kapitoly z dejín slovenského myslenia*, Bratislava, 1995.

⁵ Slovenský národný archív, Uhorské ministerstvo vnútra v Budapešti, kart. 10, i. č.62.

oriented Slovak nationalists: the Slovak People's Party (Slovenská ľudová strana).⁶

In some cases, the relationship of those priests to their parishioners could be strengthened by their intense commitment to social and political issues, their personalities, and sometimes popular antipathy to forcible interventions in parish affairs by external authorities — as we shall see later. In the following part we investigate those cases in the context of the so-called “Catholic (church) autonomy” question.

The Slovak Nationalist Movement and the “Catholic Autonomy” Question in Hungary

After the establishment of the Dual monarchy in 1867, liberal-oriented Catholic politicians in Hungary led by Minister of Religion and Education József Eötvös had aimed for realization of the equality of all confessions under the concept of “free church in a free state”.⁷ This concept also included introduction of church autonomy, that is the independence of the Catholic Church, which had enjoyed a privileged position for a long time, from protection and control by state authority. The main provision of Eötvös's program on church autonomy was the election of representative assemblies at all levels from the parish to the highest church authority. According to him, these assemblies composed of clerical and lay members were to assume control over administration of church property and endowments, and direction of all Catholic schools.⁸

Eötvös's concept of church autonomy was espoused by lower clergy and laity. Meanwhile, higher clergy expressed reservations about the participation of laymen in church administration, though they appreciated the independence of the Catholic Church from state authority.⁹ From the viewpoint of bishops, Catholic autonomy should be limited to an *external* autonomy, that means autonomy of the Catholic Church from state. Therefore, they never intended to accept any form of *internal* autonomy, that is autonomy within the Church enabling independence of lower clergy and laity from higher clergy.¹⁰ This dual attitude of

⁶ On the forming process of the Slovak People's Party, see: Letz, R., Mulík, P., Bartlová, A. (eds.), *Slovenská ľudová strana v dejinách 1905-1945*, Martin, 2006; Lorman, T., *The Making of the Slovak People's Party: Religion, Nationalism and the Culture War in Early 20th-Century Europe*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

⁷ László, P., “Hungarian Liberals and Church-state Relations (1867-1900)”, in: Ránki, Gy. (ed.), *Hungary and European Civilization*, Budapest, 1989, p. 80.

⁸ Bödy, P., “Joseph Eötvös and the Modernization of Hungary, 1840-1870. A Study of Ideas of Individuality and Social Pluralism in Modern Politics”, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (1972), pp. 120-121.

⁹ László, op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁰ Sarnyai, Cs. M., “The views of Lajos Kossuth, József Eötvös and Ferenc Deák on Catholic autonomy”, in: Mulcahy, R., Angi, J., Glant, T. (eds.), *Hungary Through the Centuries East European Monographs*,

bishops was criticized in a national convention of Hungarian Catholics held in January 1894 in Budapest by one of the speakers, Karol Haydin, who claimed the right of secular people to participate in Catholic autonomy based on Eötvös's concept.¹¹ The Catholic People's Party, which was founded at the end of the same year, went along with Eötvös's concept of Catholic autonomy, though it was otherwise a hard-line opponent of the liberal church reform agenda such as civil marriage, secular family registration, and completely equal rights for all confessions and religions. The original political program of the party included demands for removal of state control over church affairs (property management, school administration, nomination of higher clergy) and establishment of Catholic autonomy at each level of state: national, county, and municipal.¹²

It seems that the Catholic autonomy question was also one of the important topics in the arguments of the Catholic-oriented nationalists. The aforementioned Andrej Hlinka published under a pseudonym a brochure entitled *The Catholic Autonomy in the Kingdom of Hungary (Katolícka autonómia [samospráva] v Uhorsku)* in 1899, when he was working as a devoted activist of the Catholic People's Party. According to the author, since the Revolution of 1848 the basis of Catholic autonomy, which the Church should rely on, had shifted from the king or aristocrats to the "people (ľud)", namely ordinary citizens and peasants.¹³ Hlinka therefore asserts that the Church should grant the "people" — not the king or aristocrats — the right of patronage (Lat. *ius patronatus*)¹⁴, or the right to nominate parish clergy, which had been granted to founders of parishes or contributors to construction and maintenance of church institutions. It would help the "people", he argues, to participate in the church affairs such as property management, school administration, and nomination of clergy. As a reason

Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 121.

¹¹ Oswald, R., *Čo chceli uhorskí katolíci dňa 16. januára 1894 v Budapešti a čo tam pokonali?* (*Katolícke Hlasy* 3), Turčiansky Svätý Martin, 1894, s. 43-50.

¹² *Čo chce ľudová strana?*, s. 23-24.

¹³ Pravdomil, A. (Hlinka, A.), *Katolícka autonómia (samospráva) v Uhorsku (Katolícke Hlasy 4)*, Ružomberok, 1899, s. 33.

¹⁴ In the Kingdom of Hungary, the right of parish patronage was the King's prerogative (the primary patronage) in principle and had been granted by the King to the nobles, the royal free cities, and the market towns in the royal estates as a privilege. The patronage held by the nobles also could be granted by them to the market towns in their estates. Additionally, the royal charters issued to the cities sometimes included the right of parish patronage. In this case, the cities were able to establish parishes and to construct church buildings at their own expense. For the cities in the Kingdom of Hungary, retention of the right of patronage was an important symbol of their political autonomy. Völgyesi, L., "Városi kegyúri jogok az újkori Magyarországon", *Iustum Aequum Salutare* VI, 2010, 125-129.

for this claim, Hlinka alleges that in a multi-confessional state such as Hungary, the King and the aristocratic bishops are not able to play the role of guardian of the Catholic Church against attack from liberalism, therefore only the “people”, who protect the Church, are eligible for the right of patronage.¹⁵ This argument on Catholic autonomy is clearly based on that of Eötvös and the Catholic People’s Party, but it also reflects the more radical, mass-oriented character of Hlinka’s standpoint.

As another example of the arguments on Catholic autonomy in the framework of the Slovak nationalist movement, we can cite an editorial of the *Catholic News* (*Katolícke noviny*), a Slovak paper for the Catholic-oriented nationalist, entitled “Catholic Autonomy and the Slovak People (Katolícka autonómia (samospráva) a ľud slovenský)” (No. 15 in 1899, dated August 5). According to its anonymous author, the Christian consciousness of the Slovak people remains weak, and it contributes to their subordination to the “lords (páni)” as opponents of the Catholic Church — namely “liberal” politicians and local officials as advocates of civil marriage, with Jews as their ally. The prime aim of Catholic autonomy is to enhance the Christian faith of the Slovak people and to liberate them from this subordinate status. For this purpose, the church schools which provide education in the Slovak language are indispensable, because it is the only means of instruction for the people. Therefore, it is necessary that the Slovak people hold the right of patronage in their own parishes and achieve Catholic autonomy, including the church school administration.¹⁶

Thus, the Catholic-oriented Slovak nationalists called for opposition to Magyarization of school language, confrontation with the “lords” and Jews, and church autonomy by parishioners as means necessary to protect the Catholic faith of the Slovak people against the secularizing force of liberalism. However, how did the ordinary parishioners, who were deemed in those arguments to be the bearer of church autonomy, become involved in this question? To explain this, we examine three cases in the following part.

The Catholic Autonomy Question for Parishioners

Initially, see the case of Lúčky (Hung. Lucski) in Liptov (Hung. Liptó) County. In this parish, Father Ladislav Moyš assumed the position of administrator of church property in September 1905. At the same time, he was promised by Bishop of Spiš (Hung. Szepes) Sándor Párvy that he would also be appointed parish priest of Lúčky in a year. Then, Moyš gained credibility of his parishioners in the short term, and they came to think of acquiring the right of parish

¹⁵ Pravdomil (Hlinka), *op. cit.*, s. 34-35.

¹⁶ “Katolícka autonómia (samospráva) a ľud slovenský”, *Katolícke noviny*, roč. 50 (1899), č. 15, s. 113-115.

patronage, which had belonged to the state.¹⁷ However, since Moyš supported a candidate of the Slovak People's Party (Vavro Šrobár) in the election for the Diet of Hungary in April 1906, the authority of Liptov County regarded him as a dangerous agitator of the movement and requested the Minister of Agriculture — the holder of the right of parish patronage — to relocate him.¹⁸ As a result, Moyš was forced to move to a distant parish in October; and instead of him, Father Bartolomej Szmizsár was appointed parish priest of Lúčky by the bishop. Most of the parishioners protested against the replacement of their expected priest, and it had been rumored that Szmizsár was sent by the bishop to impose the catechism in Hungarian on the people who could understand only Slovak¹⁹ — though he himself denied it.²⁰ Then the parishioners held a rally on November 1 where 886 people, more than 60 percent of the entire population of Lúčky, signed a petition addressed to the bishop demanding the retraction of the relocation of Moyš. It also included a threatening remark that all petitioners would convert to Lutheranism unless the bishop accepted their claim.²¹ Responding to the rejection of the petition by the bishop, the parishioners of Lúčky launched a boycott of Szmizsár — they did not participate in Mass and held funerals without the priest.²²

An article on this event in the *People's News* (*Ludové noviny* — renamed from *Katolícke noviny*) written by a local correspondent in Lúčky reads as follows (No. 43 in 1906, dated October 19):

The right of patronage of our parish belongs to the state, and the church and the parish house have been little cared for. Therefore, when we got that good priest [Moyš], parishioners came to an agreement to try to change the right of patronage from below and to acquire it themselves. Although we had made the necessary preparations for it, [...] the bishop expelled our beloved spiritual father [Moyš] and wants to impose our hated one [Szmizsár] on us. [...] And who will stand for the good Slovak priest and protest against the unjust bishop? Nobody but *the Slovak people*.²³

As we see here, the parishioners of Lúčky under the influence of Moyš, the priest engaged in

¹⁷ “Čo nového u nás?”, *Ludové noviny*, roč. 57 (1906), č.43, s. 5-6.

¹⁸ Štátny archív v Bytči, Liptovská župa, kart. 1519, i. č. 2696.

¹⁹ “Čo nového u nás?”, *Ludové noviny*, roč. 57, č.48, s. 5.

²⁰ “Osvedčenie”, *Ludové noviny*, roč. 57, č.47, s. 7.

²¹ Štátny archív v Bytči, Slúžnovský úrad v Ružomberku, kart. 90, i. č. 155. On the event in Lúčky, see also: Moravčík, L., *Vzbura proti maďarizácii: Obec Lúčky v rokoch 1906-1911*, Bratislava, 2009.

²² “Čo nového u nás?”, *Ludové noviny*, roč. 58 (1907), č.2, s. 5.

²³ “Čo nového u nás?”, *Ludové noviny*, roč. 57, č.43, s. 6.

the Slovak nationalist movement, planned to realize church autonomy “from below” by acquiring the right of parish patronage. However, as Moyš was relocated by the administrative authority and the bishop, their plan was aborted. Supposedly, the parishioners reacted to this treatment so severely, because they considered that the autonomous character of the community of parishioners led by the priest was threaten by the officials and the bishop — who were nothing but external authorities for them. Szmizsár seems to be regarded by them as an agent of those authorities; therefore, he became the target of the boycott.

Secondly, consider the case of Zohor (Hung. also Zohor) in Prešporok County. On September 27, 1906, an incident occurred in the village. When Father Imre Hojszik arrived there as a newly appointed parish priest, 28 women rallying in front of the parish house abused and beat him, and eventually stripped him of his cassock.²⁴ According to an article on this event in the *People's News* (No. 41 in 1906, dated October 5), there was the following history behind the incident.

When the new church of Zohor was constructed in 1898, parishioners donated more than 70,000 forints; while Count Károlyi, holder of the right of parish patronage, contributed 9,000 forints. As a result, parishioners had come to think that they were supporting the church by themselves. Then, since the parish priest of Zohor died at the beginning of August 1906, a need to appoint his successor arose. The parishioners hoped that chaplain Michal Žák would become their new priest, for he had taken over the parish management for the sick priest and played a large role in the construction of the new church. Therefore, they sent a petition to Count Károlyi, who had the right to nominate the parish priest of Zohor. However, being concerned about Žák's activity as an agent of the Slovak nationalist movement, Count Károlyi rejected this petition and nominated Hojszik, who did not have any relation to the parishioners of Zohor. This decision caused great dissatisfaction among the parishioners and eventually led to the violent incident above. The author of this article praises the parishioners of Zohor as “awakened Slovaks” or “tough fighters for the rights of the Slovak nation” from the viewpoint of the national interpretational framework.²⁵

Meanwhile, another article in the *People's News* written by a local correspondent in Zohor reads as follows (No. 38 in 1906, dated September 14):

The Patron of the parish is Count Károlyi in Stupava [Hung. Stomfa]. This lord did not want to nominate the parson wanted by the people as priest and stood against their will. Parishioners unanimously demanded Mr. Michal Žák, our former chaplain, as their priest.

²⁴ Štátny archív v Bratislave, Fond krajský súd v Bratislave, i. č. 10, trestné spisy 1906.

²⁵ “Zohor”, *Ľudové noviny*, roč. 57, č. 41, s. 1-2.

However, the upper lords got angry with Žák, because he stood together with the people in the election [for the Diet of Hungary]. [...] They send Father Hojszik to our village. Mr. Hojszik, [...] the people want only a Slovak, not a renegade or a liberal such as you. [...] We don't want you! [...] We contributed much money for the church, nevertheless we cannot elect the priest by ourselves. Now is the time, when *Catholic autonomy* is coming, and every parish elects its priest by itself, isn't it?²⁶

This author also considers that the right to elect priests belongs to the “people” of the parish and regards the “lord” Count Károlyi and Father Hojszik — here called “liberal” — as the enemies of the “people”. From the viewpoint of the parishioners of Zohor, they should be able to execute the right to elect their own priest as the “people”, who have practically maintained the parish community; and it should be justified in the name of Catholic autonomy.

Finally, take the case of Ružomberok, a town located in the western part of Liptov County and one of the centers of the Slovak nationalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. The aforementioned Andrej Hlinka, parish priest of this town, led the election campaign of the Slovak nationalist candidate Vavro Šrobár in the election for the Diet of Hungary in April 1906. After Šrobár's defeat in this election, Hlinka was temporarily suspended by Bishop Párvy, due to his disobedience of higher clergy. Furthermore, he was arrested on suspicion of anti-state agitation and was placed into custody.

As a reaction to the suspension of Hlinka, his supporters mounted a series of protest actions against the bishop's order and boycotted priests dispatched by the bishop as substitutes for Hlinka. Among those events, the so-called “Černová tragedy” on October 27, 1907 brought the gravest consequences.²⁷ Černová, which was one of the minor residential districts of Ružomberok called the “Street” (ulica), was Hlinka's birthplace and most of its inhabitants were his followers. Although Hlinka as parish priest of Ružomberok had led the donation campaign for construction of a new church building in Černová, he could not participate in the consecration of the new church due to his suspension. On the day of the consecration, bitterly disappointed people rallied on the street to block the company of Dean Martin Pazúrik, who came to conduct the consecration, from entering Černová. In the ensuing chaos, gendarmes fired at the crowd and killed 15 people. This incident was widely reported, not only by the Slovak nationalist newspapers, but also by foreign intellectuals such as British historian Robert Seton-Watson and Norwegian novelist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson as a symbolic

²⁶ “Čo nového u nás?”, *Ludové noviny*, roč. 57, č. 38, s. 4.

²⁷ On the event in Černová and its social backgrounds, see: Holec, R., *Tragédia v Černovej a slovenská spoločnosť*, Martin, 1997.

event of the oppression of minor nationalities in the Kingdom of Hungary. However, here we focus rather on the Catholic autonomy question as a cause of the incident.

In March of the following year, 59 Černová inhabitants alleged to have participated in the protest action against Pazúrik were charged and tried. Abstract of the trial record was published in 1908 as a brochure.²⁸ Some testimonies recorded in this document suggest that behind their behavior there also existed a demand for church autonomy. According to the trial testimony of Father Pazúrik, the inhabitants of Černová had been required to make a commitment to cover the costs of maintenance of the new church building prior to its consecration. Their representatives visited the town office of Ružomberok to sign the pledge form; however, being dissatisfied with its content stating that the right of patronage of the church would belong to the bishop, they rejected it. They claimed that they should be able to hold the right of patronage themselves, because they covered the costs for construction and maintenance of the church. The inhabitants further demanded the suspension of Hlinka be lifted so that he could conduct the consecration as parish priest. Since these demands were rejected and Pazúrik was dispatched to the consecration as a substitute for Hlinka, the outraged inhabitants tried to block him by force, resulting in the turmoil.²⁹ Additionally, the police chief of Ružomberok, Béla Kroner, also testified that when he visited Černová the inhabitants declared that they would never sign the pledge form unless they acquired the right of patronage and Hlinka himself conducted the consecration.³⁰ Meanwhile, one of the inhabitants charged with participating in the protest action stated that all of them regarded the church as their own property.³¹ Taking account of these statements, it seems that as a cause of the series of people's actions in Černová there existed a shared view that the church was their own property and that the consecration should be conducted by the priest whom they wanted, because they covered the costs for the construction and maintenance of the church by themselves. Supposedly, here we can see Hlinka's influence on his parishioners. Also in this case, Catholic autonomy — or the right of parish patronage — was claimed by the side of parishioners, and its rejection by the bishop encountered their strong opposition.

²⁸ Hurban, V., *Černovský process. Pojednávany od 2. do 10. marca 1908 pred kr. súdnou stolicou v Ružomberku*, T. S. Martin, 1908.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, s. 17-18. The right of parish patronage of Ružomberok had been held by the town since 1318. However, the town lost the right in 1800; thereafter it could only elect its parish priest from three candidates recommended by the Bishop of Spiš. It caused conflict between the secular patron and the bishop. Svrček, P. (ed.), *Monografia mesta Ružomberok*, Banská Bystrica, 2009, s. 166.

³⁰ *Černovský process*, s. 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, s. 7.

Conclusion

In this paper, focusing on the relationship between Catholic priests as local agents of the Slovak nationalist movement and their parishioners, we investigated the notable cases of people's actions over the Catholic autonomy question. In the printed media of the Slovak nationalist movement such as the *People's News*, the actions of the parishioners observed in those cases were put into the specific framework of the movement and reported as the oppositional behavior of the "people" against Magyarization. However, as we have seen here, it is worth considering that behind their actions there also existed the demand for Catholic autonomy — or the right of patronage. That is to say, it is possible to relate those local cases to the broader historical context — the questions on the form of the Catholic Church in Hungarian society.

Furthermore, this viewpoint leads to the following argument: when the people who had the basis of their livelihood in local societies felt that their ingrained sense of communal interests were threatened by external authorities — the "lords" such as officials, aristocrats, or bishops, sometimes they did not hesitate to express themselves through strong protests. In some cases, the Slovak nationalist movement succeeded in gaining the support of the local inhabitants by incorporating such tendency of the people through the activities of the parish priests such as Hlinka.