



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Social briefing:
Remembering the traumas and highlights of Slovak history
Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Remembering the traumas and highlights of Slovak history

August carries an important role in Slovak history and has been a month of historical remembrance. It was on 29 August 1944 that the Slovak Uprising against the German-controlled WWII-era Slovak state erupted. Almost a quarter century later, on August 21, 1968, the armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded the then Czechoslovakia, ending the Prague Spring reform period. Both events have defining roles in modern history of Slovakia, and the way they are remembered is crucial for understanding the Slovak identity and the direction it is evolving. At the same time, they also continue to resound in the country's politics with historical experience acting as a frame for the challenges of today.

50 years since the 1968 invasion

In the early hours of 21 August 1968, the armies of four Warsaw Pact countries – the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary (with logistical support by East Germany) invaded Czechoslovakia, quickly occupying it. Following the orders of the Czechoslovak leadership not to engage with the invading forces, the Czechoslovak army remained in the barracks. Still, 137 Czechoslovak citizens died in various incidents during the occupation.

The decision to invade came after the USSR's leadership led by Brezhnev came to a conclusion that the ongoing reform movement led by Alexander Dubček became too threatening to the unity of the Soviet bloc. Dubček, who was from the Slovak part of the country, followed a program of seeking to establish „socialism with a human face“, which, among other changes, led to economic liberalisation, loosened censorship restrictions and gave more personal freedom for the Czechoslovak citizens.

After the occupation, Dubček was gradually removed from the Communist Party leadership and the new Party leaders adopted a policy of “normalization” - bringing things back to the pre-reform “normal” state. The Soviet troops

remained in Czechoslovakia until the beginning of the 1990s, acting as a reminder of who was really in control of Czechoslovakia's fate.

This year marked a 50th anniversary of the sudden end to the Prague Spring reforms, thus it triggered more attention than is usually the case. Moreover, due to the current concerns surrounding Russia's foreign policy and its influence in Slovakia, the issue is very much a political one enflaming ongoing debates.

The framing of the current debate can be illustrated in the speech of President Andrej Kiska that was broadcasted on the day of the anniversary. Kiska said that the occupation buried the hopes for freedom for the next twenty years and thus demonstrated how important it is to preserve it. If Slovakia is to defend its freedom, it needs allies that share its values, respect peoples' rights and democracy – that is, allies in the European Union and NATO.

This was a clear repudiation of popular views among the Slovak population that see Slovakia as some kind of a bridge between the West and Russia, belonging to neither. However, critics caution that bridges are meant to be walked on – Slovakia is a firm part of the West and finally needs to start identifying with it. It is argued that after the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Slovakia should be especially wary of Russia, which behaves just like its Soviet predecessor that invaded Czechoslovakia 50 years ago. After all, Russian president Vladimir Putin called the dissolution of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.

Recently, the topic of Russian influence in Slovakia has gained more and more attention. The latest *Report on the Security of the Slovak Republic* noted that Russia has been conducting targeted operation in Slovakia “manifested in particular by targeted propaganda and disinformation directed against the value system and the democratic establishment of the country”.¹ A study by a Slovak

¹ -, “Security report warns of extremists and Russian propaganda”, *The Slovak Spectator*, 1 August 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20883228/security-report-warns-of-extremists-and-russian-propaganda.html>>.

think-tank Stratpol found that Slovakia is one of the most susceptible countries to Russian influence operations in the region.²

The fears of Russian influence reached new heights when it was revealed that the Russian nationalist motorcycle club, called Night Wolves, with close links to the Russian state, opened a branch in the village of Dolná Krupá in Western Slovakia. The branch is to serve as the European headquarters of the club. The fact that the group owned some decommissioned historical military vehicles and kept them in the village without the knowledge of the authorities has created a negative momentum.

On the other hand, there are those who see the fears of Moscow's influence as exaggerated and blame it on russophobia. An outspoken member of the parliament from the ruling Smer party Ľuboš Blaha criticized those who link the 1968 invasion with current Russia, saying such views are groundless. Former Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský is another very vocal supporter of Russia in Slovakia. For supporters, Russia often presents an alternative to the EU and is painted as a protector of traditional values and a kin Slavic nation.

However, it might be hard to completely divorce the 1968 invasion from today's Russia. A poll undertaken just before the 50th anniversary of the events showed that one third of the Russians believe that the Soviet Union's action against Czechoslovakia was justified.³ At the same time, almost half of the population has not even heard about the invasion. A few years ago, a Russian television channel ran a documentary engaging in conspiracy justifying the intervention. Indeed, for those that are traumatized by the 1968 invasion Putin's Russia shares many similarities with Brezhnev's Soviet Union.

The ever-resounding Slovak National Uprising

² Volha Damarad and Andrei Yeliseyev, "Disinformation Resilience Index Central and Eastern Europe", *Stratpol*, 2018, <<http://stratpol.sk/new-book-disinformation-resilience-index-central-and-eastern-europe/>>.

³ Andrew Roth, "Nearly half of Russians ignorant of 1968's Czechoslovakia invasion – poll", *The Guardian*, 19 August 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/19/russia-warsaw-pact-1968-invasion-czechoslovakia>>.

Compared to the character of the events of 1986 - portrayed as a national trauma - the Slovak National Uprising is largely seen as one of the brightest spots of the Slovak history despite the fact that it resulted in defeat. The narrative says that for the first and only time in Slovak history the Slovak people took up arms for greater ideals and against tyranny. According to recent polls, the Slovak National Uprising is seen as the most positive event in Slovak history, surpassing even the assessment of the foundation of independent Slovakia in 1993.⁴

After the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia finished in 1939, the quasi-independent Slovak state was created. Led by a catholic priest, Jozef Tiso, it was in fact a mere puppet of Nazi Germany, closely mirroring both Berlin's foreign and domestic policies, including deportations of the Jewish population from Slovakia to the extermination camps.

The uprising against the collaborationist regime and Germany erupted on 29 August 1944, with forces of the Slovak resistance taking control of territories in Central Slovakia in the initial stage. However, a German counterattack followed, and the remaining resistance fighters had to resort to guerrilla warfare in the mountains. German troops perpetrated several massacres of the civilian population in retribution. Despite not having achieved its initial objectives, the Slovak National Uprising became a powerful symbol of the anti-fascist resistance

Still, for some, the Slovak National Uprising remains controversial. Until now, many continue to see Tiso as a positive figure who brought independence for Slovakia during the WWII and presided over alleged economic prosperity, when most of Europe was ravaged by flames of war. For those who hold this view, the Slovak Uprising is seen as a betrayal of Slovakia that finally gained its independence for the first time in its history.

⁴ - „Slovenské národné povstanie je najvýznamnejšou historickou udalosťou“, *Sme*, 23 March 2018, <<https://domov.sme.sk/c/20788015/focus-slovenske-narodne-povstanie-je-najvyznamnejsoo-historickou-udalostou.html>>.

The most visible representatives of this view are members of the neo-fascist political party Kotleba - People's Party Our Slovakia. The party holds 14 seats in the Slovak Parliament (out of 150 in total) and maintains a constant support of around 10% in the opinion polls. The leader of the party, Marián Kotleba, in a cruel irony of history, served as the Governor of the Banská Bystrica region – the origin of the Slovak National Uprising – between 2013 and 2017. During the anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising, his office would fly a black flag, demonstrating his view of the “plot“ against the Slovak state perpetrated by “bandits“.

The success of Kotleba and his party was a shock for many in Slovakia. The party has been shunned by other political parties, and President Andrej Kiska even refused to meet with Kotleba when he served as Governor. Finally, in the 2017 elections, Kotleba was defeated by an opponent supported by parties belonging to the whole spectrum of democratic parties. However, the continuing support enjoyed by Kotleba's party remains worrying.

Conclusion

The Slovak National Uprising and the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact forces are one of the most crucial events in Slovak history. Apart from the issue of historical remembrance, they remain vivid through their reflection in the current political environment.

Interestingly, there is some overlap between those who downplay the 1968 invasion and related fears of today's Russia and those who criticize the Slovak National Uprising and defend the wartime collaborationist proto-fascist Slovak state. Their recipes for a successful Slovakia usually involve distancing or even directly leaving the EU and NATO. While such views are in a minority, they cannot be discounted.

What is certain is that historical events may gain new meanings under new circumstances and the evolving views on history may signal the future directions for the country.

