



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Slovakia social briefing:**

**Ice-hockey – the most unifying aspect in the Slovak society and a part  
of its identity**

**Natália Goda**

## **Ice-hockey – the most unifying aspect in the Slovak society and a part of its identity**

The Slovaks are a relatively old nation, dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but as a country, Slovakia belongs to the younger ones, getting its independence just 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1993. When a new state comes into existence, there is a bunch of aspects it has to deal with – international recognition, economic aspects, membership within various international organisations but last and definitely not least the aspect of identity and national awareness

The dissolution of Czecho-Slovakia was a peaceful process, but the most important point – it was a process negotiated, agreed and conducted by the country's politicians, without the final approval of its citizens in a referendum (which would most probably have ended up against the dissolution). This had a negative effect on the newly independent Slovakia – a state, whose independence wasn't wanted that much by its own citizens. The older generation, who lived their whole life during former Czecho-Slovakia couldn't imagine anything like an independent Slovak republic. Exactly the opposite, the younger generation being born already in the new independent Slovakia didn't feel any straight connection towards the former state.

But the independence was a reality and there was a need to deal with the aspects I mentioned above. Within the topic of national identity, Slovakia not only didn't consist of people, who were for or against independence, but also of people with different political affinity. Even though this may sound strange, one of the aspects shaping our national identity and uniting the whole nation was and still is –  
**ICE-HOCKEY.**

The former Czecho-Slovak Republic belonged to powerhouses of ice-hockey. During its 66 years tenure (not counting the WW2), the Czechoslovak ice-hockey team clinched 30 medals at the World Championships (6 gold, 10 silver, 14 bronze) and eight medals from the Olympics (4 silver, 4 bronze). The former ice-hockey team played on the highest level at the international stage. After the dissolution, the Czech hockey team stayed as a successor in the A level, but the

Slovak ice-hockey team was considered as a brand new one and had to begin from the bottom category, from the very beginning.

This is something, which was applying for Slovakia as a whole, not only in sports. A new country, which had to apply for the UN membership, striving to join the integration processes into the EU and NATO and looking for its place within the international community. The same went for the ice-hockey team, in 1993 there was organised the meet up of eligible Slovak hockey players to form a brand new one.

Slovakia did get the right to organise the World Championships in C and B category in 1994 and 1995. This was the first time the newly founded team competed at international level, each time progressing into a higher category. The completely sold out stadiums and whole nation watching was the first sign of something, which definitely put the whole country together.

But the highlight came at the Lillehammer Winter Olympics 1994. Slovakia as a new representation existing only a year was not supposed to play there at all. But thanks to the diplomatic skills and final speech of our then ice-hockey federation president at the IIHF summit in Munich, we were (after a vote 50 to 32) granted a spot at least in qualification tournament. Slovakia took part in the Olympic qualifier in Sheffield in 1993, where we defeated Great Britain 7:1, Japan 7:2, Latvia 7:1 and tied with Poland 4:4. This meant that we had our ice-hockey team at the Olympics ever sooner than at the A category of the World Championship (which happened in 1996).

The expectation of a team existing only one year wasn't that big at all. For our established opponents, we were considered as someone exotic, someone coming to the Olympics just to get some experience. But after surprisingly beating Canada 3:1, tying with USA and Sweden 3:3, respectively 4:4 and later on defeating Italy and France brought Slovakia on the top of its group. The whole nation was watching the games, praising the play of newly formed team and sending the players letters and faxes to Norway. Unfortunately, the Cinderella story ended with an overtime loss 2:3 against Russia. But overall, the 6<sup>th</sup> place was an enormous success and surprise. After arrival back home, the team was greeted by the overjoyed fans and even received by the then prime minister and one of the most controversial Slovak politicians – Vladimír Mečiar.

This was one of the first and biggest breakthrough of Slovakia on the world scene. This performance also set the basics for ice-hockey as the most popular sport in Slovakia. Today's general manager of Slovak ice-hockey team Miroslav Šatan became the top scorer at the Olympics in Lillehamer and later on, made his name as the player with the most goals ever scored for the Slovak national team.

The story continued – not only in ice-hockey. Slovakia as a full member of UN, OECD or WTO set the course towards the EU and NATO, which was successfully achieved in 2004. Along with the diplomatic course of Slovakia also went the results in the most popular sport. Slovakia was able to win silver (2000, 2012), bronze (2003) and gold (2002) medals. Especially the gold medal is considered as one of the biggest successes of Slovak sports until today. After losing at the Olympics qualification in Salt Lake city in 2002, being one of the biggest disappointments, the players wanted to show that they can do better.

In Swedish city of Goteborg, 11<sup>th</sup> of May, Slovakia defeated Russia 4:3 and won its only gold medal. The overcrowded squares in the Slovak cities, people celebrating on the streets, politicians of all parties congratulating the players – everyone wanted to be a part of the winning team. Even today, if you would ask anyone in Slovakia “*What were you doing on that evening, where were you at that time?*”, he/she would definitely know the answer. The captain of the golden team, Miroslav Šatan, had a speech in the Slovak parliament, which is, until today, the only Slovak sportsmen getting such honour. This only underlines the importance of this sport and its connection to the Slovak national identity.

In the following years, one could see the changes in Slovak society. Thanks to the accession into the EU, Slovakia has gotten more investments, the unemployment rate has decreased significantly, and the economic situation has improved. Slovakia was a member of UN Security Council in years 2006-07, was presiding the EU, OSCE or the Ministerial council of the OECD. On the diplomatic and social field, there have definitely been changes and developments a 25-years old state can be proud of.

On the other hand, after those successes the Slovak hockey has declined. The number of our players in the NHL oscillates around 5-8 pro season, the results of the national team aren't that good as well, as Slovakia now hardly reaches quarterfinals. But when comparing the interests of the people,

certainly a huge majority will rather name you the national team line-up than knowing in which years Slovakia was a UN Security Council member state.

The best proof could be seen in 2011, when Slovakia organised the World Championship for the first time in its history. The Slovak population consisting of 5,5 million people quickly transformed into 5,5 million “ice-hockey trainers” , the whole country watching, schools and businesses adjusting their hours according to the games of the national team, Slovak games having the highest watching-rate in the television – this was the Hockey republic.

Now the buzz can be seen again as Slovakia is organising the World Championships after eight years. Regardless of the results, everyone wants to be a part of this event. For a brief moment, also the political scene is going to be united into one. It is one of the biggest events ever organised in Slovakia, where the young nation will be welcoming many fans from around the globe. They all will see not only the beauties of Slovakia, our hospitality but also feeling the “ice-hockey vibe” and the unity.

The fan-zones are ready and both organising cities of Bratislava and Košice are prepared to welcome the World. This is just highlighted by the high interest in the tickets, which were sold out within hours.

In 2018, Slovakia did celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence. Among everything Slovakia has reached in the last 25 years, one achievement(s) stood clear on the top. The success in ice-hockey, the medals our country was able to clinch in the past. Even the football team playing at FIFA World Cup or European Championship or having the world’s class cyclist Peter Sagan, ice-hockey still tops the sporting interests of Slovaks.

After the fragmentation of the Slovak political scene, the events which led to the fall of Slovak government in the Spring of 2018 and the division of the society, there is only one such phenomenon, which can – at least for a while – fix all this together. And this will be the performance of the Slovak ice-hockey team, the time when the Slovak Republic will briefly change its name into the Hockey republic.