

Robert Ištok, Dominika Plavčanová<sup>1</sup>

## GEOSTRATEGIC POSITION OF SLOVAKIA (SELECTED ISSUES)

### Abstract:

Geostrategic analyses of position of the state are focused on evaluation of its location and geographic, demographic, economic and military attributes in geopolitical context, mainly in the comparison with neighbouring countries. From the small and middle state's point of view are those analysis linked with their foreign policy orientation and at the same time they contribute to its national interests formulation. Submitted analysis presents the position of Slovak Republic in the Central-European space and points to selected geostrategic specifics in relation with neighbouring countries, as well as to broader geopolitical space. It also briefly analyse geopolitical contexts of Slovakia's integration process with western structures.

**Key words:** geostrategy, geopolitics, Slovakia

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. RNDr. Robert Ištok, Department of Geography and Applied Geoinformatics, University of Presov in Presov, Slovakia: robert.istok@unipo.sk  
PhD – RNDr. Dominika Plavčanová, Department of Geography and Applied Geoinformatics, University of Presov in Presov, Slovakia.

## Introduction

The relationship between geopolitics and geostrategy is often seen from different perspectives. In available literature, we can find the characteristics of geo-strategy as a sub-discipline of geopolitics (Sykulski 2009), while their relationship is understood in terms of their equal status in the political thinking (Baczwarow-Suliborski 2002) or even in terms of the status of geopolitics as an auxiliary discipline of geostrategic studies (Dobczyński ed. 2013).

In all connections, the concept of geo-strategy is originally understood in the military context. Interconnection with geopolitics is very narrow and geostrategy without geopolitical substrate loses its beneficial value. C. Jean (2003) promotes the idea that geo-strategy is a "military geopolitics" with which we can identify.

Therefore, from our point of view it is natural that the subjects of geostrategic analysis in terms of the state are primarily geopolitical aspects, in terms of evaluating its position and especially the balance of physical and social-geographical features in comparison with neighboring countries. Part of this analysis should be more detailed assessment of the specifics that affect its position in the surrounding geopolitical environment. The evaluation of these aspects can clearly contribute to the development of military doctrines of major powers and at the minimum to the formulation of national interests of middle and small size states.

From the position of medium/middle and small states, geostrategy is therefore primarily related to the line of their foreign policy. Linking with geopolitics rests with the geopolitical environment in which states operate and the subject of changes is primarily related to the decline, respectively connected with the strengthening of existing centers of power, but also with the emergence of new ones. Medium/middle and small states need to react flexibly to such changes. State has to accept geostrategy, which reflects the objectively existing geopolitical conditions (Dobczyński ed. 2013).

In the geopolitical context it is necessary to mention that the term "geostrategy" has appeared after the World War II and replaces by the Nazis discredited term "geopolitics". Thus, the analysis had indeed geopolitical nature, but it was presented as "geo-strategic". Thus, the concept of "geostrategy" became superior to geopolitics. Today, we can conclude that geostrategy is essentially military geopolitics. As L. Moczulski (2009) writes, geostrategy is a part of geopolitics, which focuses on peace and military rivalry between the military potentials. However, these potentials are closely linked to geopolitical aspects.

The submitted analysis presents the position of the Slovak Republic in Central Europe and highlights the selected geostrategic specifics in relation to neighboring countries, and to the broader geopolitical space. It also briefly analyzes the geopolitical context during the process of Slovakia's integration into western structures.

### **Slovakia's position in space-political structure**

Slovakia is according to its area (49,034 km<sup>2</sup>) on the 126th place among the countries of the world and in terms of population (5,445 thousands) on the 110th place. This would suggest that Slovakia belongs to the small states. According to the geopolitical classifications of states, in this aspect is Slovakia rated as a small state (Bucek et al. 2009).

It may be stated that the criterion of "size" of the state is very vague and imprecise. Its assessment depends on a subjective approach, of who evaluates the size. In this context, it is about the perception of its citizens (amateurs and professionals), as well as its political leaders, respectively foreign observers. The state is thus small if it presents itself as small and if the others think it is (Drulák 1997).

While the former Czechoslovakia was considered as a medium size country, both successor states are different. Not only Slovak geographers, but also political scientists consider Slovakia in this regard as a small state. Slovak geographer K. Ivanička (1999) writes that the population and area rank the Slovak Republic among small countries. Also according to D. Šmihula (2000), Slovakia is "within its geographic and demographic parameters small Central European state." These assessments are based on the basic geographic data - area and population.

In recent years the number of small states in the world is growing. In addition, it can be stated that many of these countries prosper well. The situation in the post-Cold War gave the opportunity to rise for a number of separate states, most of which can be considered in terms of its population and area as small. At the same time open system of world economy helps viable existence of small states (Drulák 1998). These findings are encouraging for Slovakia.

Size of the state do not depends only on the size of its population and area. Also the other indicators should be taken into account. Several authors have already focused on the issue of hierarchical typology of states. It should be emphasized that an important factor in assessing the size of the state is the extent of its power, understood as the ability to influence the behavior of other states according to its own plans, respectively on enforcement of its will to assert its interests in various regions. These capabilities are limited in many states. "Small" in this context thus means "not too strong" (Drulák 1997). Mentioned skills depend on several factors which are very diverse in nature, and basic geographical parameters (area and population) are although significant, but in that context not always decisive. If we analyze the position of Slovakia in terms of its "size" (also from the aspect of the scope of authority) and the relationship to its neighbors, respectively to other countries of Central Europe, then we must conclude that Slovakia is in this area the "least powerful" state.

It should be noted that the "size" is an important factor influencing the conduct of states, but it is influenced also by the other factors (e.g. the economic level, geographic location, nature and stability of the political system, respectively institutional organization of the state). Therefore, even states that are approximately the same size in terms of area and population would not be similar in other characteristics. If we compare countries which have approximately the same population as Slovakia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Croatia, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Nicaragua, Papua - New Guinea, Turkmenistan), we can conclude that this is a very heterogeneous group of countries, belonging to different levels of "size". Slovakia by taking into account several criteria belongs among the "biggest" state in this group.

Finally, in the issue of "size" and "smallness" of Slovakia should be emphasized that these indicators in terms of state's position an important role plays the international prestige acquired by state success in domestic and foreign policy, the level of the economy, the quality of science and research as well as the participation in integration processes and engaging in international missions in the framework of humanitarian assistance, respectively peacekeepers. In this context, the position of Slovakia since its declaration of independence has improved.

The defining characteristics of Slovakia include its inland location. It appears that in the case of relatively small Europe (as

opposed to other continents) it does not mean that the position of the state has only the negative effects. The nuanced approach is represented by the access to the Danube waterway. As Klein (2000) writes, "even though the Danube touches the borders of Slovakia only in the southwest, the geopolitical space of Slovakia is crucially influenced by this European communications corridor." The Danube strengthens its economic and transport position and connects it with the countries of Southeast and Western Europe, with which it has a direct territorial contact. Finally, it also provides access to the Black Sea through the canal Rhine - Main - Danube and to the North Sea. Certain advantages for Slovakia as a European landlocked country present the possibility of developing transit transport, supported by extensive trade between the countries of the integrating continent. The traditional weakness of the inland location of states, consisting in terrestrial borders as barriers to access to the sea, has been removed in Europe, after the creation and expansion of the Schengen system, which Slovakia joined in the end of 2007.

### **Establishment of Slovakia into Western structures**

If we agree with the statement of G. Baziur (2014), the Slovak identity formation has been linked to separatist-emancipatory movements of Slovaks in relation to Hungary, then we can conclude that these processes continued during Slovakia's membership of the Czechoslovak State (1918-1939 and 1945-1992). In the

groundbreaking historical periods there has been consolidated effort of independence. After the collapse of the communist bloc in the years 1989 - 1990, these efforts resulted on January 1, 1993 by the emergence of the independent Slovak Republic.

After the split of Czechoslovakia into two independent states the Slovak Republic went through a complex way with the ambition to establish itself within the framework of Western civilization with all the political and economic consequences that goes with it. This objective was complicated to gain by several factors. In particular, gaining independence in 1993 as a result of a long emancipation process meant a new experience for Slovakia. Unlike its neighbors, Slovakia was previously part of larger state structures, and within them it still acted as a weaker part. The advantage was that the new Slovak Republic immediately after its creation was acknowledged by all powers, as well as many other countries in the world.

The period after 1993 can be characterized by the search for its own path in transformation strategy, which was marked by several problems. These resulted mainly from internal political changes. In addition, political and economic developments in Slovakia were affected by a lack of experience in dealing with new problems related to the transformation of the political and economic system. Integration ambitions of Slovakia were from 1990 to 1998 broken by the government policy of Vladimir Meciar, leader of the (HZDS) Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. In this period there have been



several negative interventions in the establishment of Slovakia as a trustworthy country ready to join the European Union and NATO.

In May 1993 Zbigniew Brzezinski visited Slovakia, where he met with top political leaders led by Vladimir Meciar. At this meeting, the American political scientist outlined alternative scenarios of geopolitical destiny of Slovakia, in case if it does not reach the first group of countries that will be taken into Western structures, like other countries of the Visegrad Group. Such a development seen as a "geopolitical adventure" and its implementation would mean "a tragedy for all the inhabitants of Slovakia." He pointed out the proximity of the "oval violence", which will concentrate conflicts and hence the security risks.

Nevertheless, during the government of Vladimir Meciar there was no significant shift in the question of Slovakia's integration into Western structures. The country was ranked among the "Carpathian democracy", a term reflecting the insufficient degree of political transformation in the context of authoritarian rule of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). Government policy has opted for a "geopolitical adventure".

An important part of the political development in the years 1993-1997 was a discussion about the entry into Western structures, particularly into NATO. Vladimir Meciar expressed his conviction about the importance of geopolitical position of Slovakia, which itself will ensure the adoption of the country into NATO. Very famous became

his saying "not without us" in terms of the geopolitical features of Slovakia as a bridge between East and West. But at the same time he forgot that the evaluation of the geostrategic and geopolitical position of Slovakia cannot build the illusion of self-importance.

Slovak analyst Alexander Duleba (1997) expressed concern that after the admission of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary into NATO, its further expansion is blocked and Slovakia will become part of "the new Central Europe". Besides Slovakia it will constitute of Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine - countries that have not reached a sufficient degree of internal transformation in order to be considered as stable partners. Slovakia's participation in such a "gray zone" would mean its internal political and international political degradation.

Slovakia thus fell out of the first wave of NATO enlargement, when Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary became member states in 1999. Previously it changed the rhetoric of government officials under questioning the need of Slovakia's accession to the organization. The culmination of this policy was the referendum thwarted by the government, in which in March 1997 citizens of the country expressed their will to entry NATO. During this period, gradually enforce opinions, supporting the prospects of Slovakia as a neutral state. These ideas were based on the premise that Slovakia is a small country and therefore its foreign policy should be oriented towards neutrality guaranteed by the European powers and neighboring states (Carpenter 1994).

In 1998, the government of Vladimir Meciar had been replaced by a new political class, consisting of a broad coalition of formerly opposition parties and movements. Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda, who performed the post in two terms (1998 - 2006), focused government policies on stabilization the internal situation and transformation of the economy. In foreign policy, Slovakia focused on intensifying preparations for entry into Western structures. These actions led in 2004 to the adoption of the Slovak Republic to the European Union and NATO.

After the integration into these clusters Slovakia took up positions on their eastern border. At the same time after its accession to the Schengen area Slovakia presents part of its eastern border. It is the border with Ukraine, which is the largest neighbor of the Slovak Republic. In terms of security the eastern border with Ukraine represents the greatest threat for Slovakia and it is linked to the separatist conflicts and tensions in the east Ukrainian-Russian relations. Another threat stems from patent transport lines of energy carriers that lead from Russia through Ukrainian territory.

Slovak political elites after 1998 partly modernize and open up the economy and ensure the democratic development of the country along the lines of developed Western democracies. Slovakia's integration into the European Union and NATO has substantially changed its international status. Slovakia increased its political weight in the global context since it became an ally of the most developed

countries of the West. In addition, membership in Western structures allows Slovakia to assert its interests more effectively towards the other States.

### **Geostrategic position of Slovakia in relation to neighboring countries**

As we already mentioned, the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993 meant a fundamental geopolitical change for Slovakia. While Czech-Slovakia was among the countries of medium size, Slovak Republic moves towards a small state. In relation to its neighbors Slovakia came to the new position of power and at the same time transformed the relative importance of the neighboring countries for Slovak politics (Tesař 1994).

**Figure 1: Slovakia and neighboring countries - basic demographic and economic indicators**

<b>Slovakia and its neighbors - basic, demographic and economic indicators</b>				
<b>State</b>	<b>Area (km<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>The number of inhabitants (mil; 2015)</b>	<b>GDP (mld. USD; 2014)</b>	<b>GDP per capita (USD; 2014)</b>
<b>Slovakia</b>	49 035	5,445	152,6	28 600
<b>Poland</b>	312 885	38,562	954,5	25 100
<b>Ukraine</b>	603 550	44,429	370,8	8 700
<b>Hungary</b>	93 028	9,898	246,4	24 900
<b>Austria</b>	83 871	8,666	395,5	46 400
<b>Czech Rep.</b>	78 867	10,645	314,6	29 900

Source: according to ciafactbook.com

An analysis of the data presented in Figure 1 does show that the Slovak Republic is in all indicators of absolute last. All the neighbors are not only larger, but also demographically numerous. In Europe, Slovakia has so between land-locked States specific position. Excluding the smallest States (San Marino, Liechtenstein, Andorra and Luxembourg), then Slovakia has the biggest difference between its territorial and demographic potential and the same indicators of neighboring countries - Czech Republic is more than a third larger and Hungary has nearly twice the population.

When comparing the basic economic indicators, Slovakia is on the last place in terms of gross domestic product, which is absolute data. The analysis of data relating to the conversion of the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of Slovakia is on the third place among neighboring states. On the other hand, the country is characterized by the highest level of unemployment.

In the context of analysis of geostrategic situation of the state is essential to take into account also military indicators. According to available data, the position of Slovakia among neighboring countries is more balanced. Its military budget in 2014 almost reached the level of Hungary. Relative to other countries in the context of the military budget and numbers of military personnel is a place of Slovakia in relation to neighboring countries adequate to his position in terms of demographic indicators.

**Figure 2: Slovakia and the neighboring states - Military indicators**

<b>Slovakia and its neighbors - basic, demographic and economic indicators</b>				
<b>State</b>	<b>Military budget (mld. USD; 2014)</b>	<b>Military personal (thousands, 2014)</b>	<b>Demographic indicator (the number of MP per thousand capita)</b>	<b>Territorial indicator (the number of MP per 100 km<sup>2</sup>)</b>
<b>Slovakia</b>	1,025	13,50	2,47	27,53
<b>Poland</b>	9,360	120,00	3,11	38,35
<b>Ukraine</b>	4,880	160,00	3,60	26,51
<b>Hungary</b>	1,040	20,00	2,02	21,50
<b>Austria</b>	3,220	29,50	3,40	35,17
<b>Czech Republic</b>	2,220	21,06	1,98	26,70

Source: according to ciafactbook.com

When analyzing the relative indicators, the position of the Slovakia is at the average. The demographic military indicator (frequency of military personnel per thousand inhabitants) is the fourth largest country (before the Czech Republic and Hungary). In comparison of the military territorial indicators (number of military personnel to 100 km<sup>2</sup>) Slovakia occupies the third place (before Hungary, Ukraine and the Czech Republic).

## **Conclusion**

Slovak Republic, described as a post-communist country has gradually become a fully accepted country of the international community. It turned out that the assumption of Slovakia as an

independent state, which "could in the international interactions more efficiently start using its geographical location, natural, economic and human potential as was the dysfunctional unitaristic Czechoslovak Federation" (Zatlkaj 1992) was true. As Halás writes (2005), also nowadays there is a challenge for Slovakia that consists of "stabilization and transformation of political, economic and social system."

Slovakia is characterized by the small size of the territory, low population and also limited natural and economic resources. These characteristics influence the extent of spatial framework, which may promote Slovakia as a power factor. Past performance of the country as an independent state allows us to agree with the M. Veress (2005), which considers the Slovak Republic to be the culmination of geopolitical developments of Slovak territory and the ideal framework for the completion ethno genesis of Slovaks. Geostrategic position of Slovakia in the context of neighboring countries, as well as its successful integration into Western structures allows us to believe that the country will steadily fulfill its function in relation to its citizens.

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