

DZURINDA - THE STRENGTH OF A BROAD COALITION

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As reported in EPP News 07 [HUNGARIAN MINORITY VOWS TO STOP MECIAR], the September elections in Slovakia could be make-or-break for Slovakia's bid for EU membership and the country's transition to the European mainstream. Despite overwhelming public support for joining the EU - at 70% the highest in any candidate country - the nationalist former prime minister Vladimir MECIAR and his HZDS party remain consistently popular. This despite the fact that Meciar's policies were the reason for Slovakia being dropped from the first round of EU enlargement in 1997. Ahead of this weekend's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) congress, party leader and Slovak Prime Minister Mikulas DZURINDA talks to Edward STEEN about national identity, and the surprising advantages he found in governing with a broad coalition of parties.

EPP News: *You see the September elections as a watershed? In what way? And what are your prospects for success?*

Mikulas DZURINDA: I would like to emphasise that if change was necessary in 1998 – an overall change in the way that the state had been managed - today we need continuity. If we provide for that continuity, if we continue with the reforms and we become a member of NATO and of the EU, an important watershed will take place, and our country will permanently, institutionally, be integrated with the countries of western civilisation. The September elections will be about this and if we succeed I will consider this a real success for Slovakia - the success that our party is striving for.

EPPN: *Which concerns are mainly reflected in your new programme?*

MD: We want to concentrate mainly on our country's integration into NATO and the European Union. The necessity of continuing with internal reforms is also connected with that process. We suffer from an ineffective social system, and we are preparing a programme of pension reform. Our unemployment rate is high and membership in NATO and the EU will mean higher security for foreign investments that should help our poorer regions. We also want to emphasise support for education. We see an opportunity for our people to be successful at home as well as in the EU's Single Market.



EPPN: *The Enlargement Commissioner Guenter VERHEUGEN hints that Slovakia could return to its old pariah status if Meciar forms the next government. Is there a real danger of that?*

MD: I understand the worries to which Commissioner Verheugen is alluding. The politicians of the previous governmental team showed by their actions that they did not belong to Europe. Today they are changing their vocabulary, but the reasons for worrying remain. However, we are confident that a government guaranteeing the continuity of our policies will be formed after the elections.

EPPN: *Is the extreme right now a greater danger than the Left?*

MD: Every extremism is dangerous, be it of the Right or the Left. In the last century we saw what horrors are produced by extremism, and by the totalitarianism it can lead to. On the other hand, even though I do not agree with the standard Left, i.e. with the Socialists or with the Social Democrats, on most issues, I consider them to be a legitimate component of European politics. We

have to look for effective ways of beating them in a fair, legitimate political fight, and winning the public over to our values.

EPPN: *What many outside Slovakia do not understand is how Slovaks, who are broadly so pro-European, can square this with considerable support for a narrow-minded nationalist.*

MD: You are right, most Slovaks are pro-European. But at the same time a considerable part of the population trusts non-standard politicians, people who in the past were an obstacle to our admission to NATO and the EU. This could be explained by a confusion of some citizens after 40 years of Communist totalitarian government. Many people experienced a trauma, a loss of their personal identity. For example, some people were in the Communist Party because of their careers, even though they didn't believe in those ideas. These people loved - and many of them still love - Mr Meciar, because he too was a KSC (Communist Party) member. He was one of them.

Today we see that the success of nationalists is not just a problem in post-Communist democracies. I think it is a challenge for our parties all over Europe: how to reinforce common values, to be "European" as well as patriotic.

EPPN: *It must be difficult to run things with such a kaleidoscope of parties in the coalition...*

MD: Of course, it was not easy to govern with such a wide Right-Left-wing coalition, in which a former dissident and Communist sat together at one table. Moreover, our government inherited large debts, a system of inefficient subsidies, stagnating reforms, collapsing public finances.... We felt that it was wrong that after 1998 the country was, step by step, becoming isolated. We have managed successfully to reverse this.

What used to look like our weakness - too broad a political spectrum within one government coalition - seems today to be our common force. With broad agreement we have managed to make extensive reforms and at the same time to keep the coalition alive. Now we are on the doorstep of NATO and the EU.

EPPN: *The coalition includes the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK), representing Slovakia's large Hungarian minority.*

MD: The Hungarian Coalition Party has been a stable partner in the broad government coalition despite being composed of three different strands of opinion. Throughout the time of this government coalition, a bright, pro-European tone prevailed, and we were able to find a common language on the paramount issues related to the present and the future of our country. I would personally like to see the future of the Hungarian Coalition Party in a broad alliance of the Christian-democratic family consisting of SDKÚ, KDH, and SMK. I think that future developments will sooner or later lead towards such coalitions of parties with similar programs.

EPPN: *What special quality do you think Slovakia will bring to the Union when you join?*

MD: Asserting and reinforcing common values, on which western civilisation and Slovakia stand together, is in my opinion the most important thing. During the Kosovo crisis in 1999, but also after the September 11 terrorist attacks last year, our government showed that we understand the core meaning of these values and are ready to act to protect them. Each organisation has to remind itself of the foundations on which it stands and re-confirm the principles according to which it makes its decisions.

I am sure that Slovakia is able to present itself with self-confidence in the structures of NATO and the EU, and that she will make contributions to useful European discussions and protect those values that represent the cornerstone of these communities.