

DOES HUNTINGTON CONCERN SLOVAKIA?

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Some time ago, an exchange took place in the pages of the Slovak weekly, *Domino Fórum*, as to whether the more sensible solution to our present political difficulties might not be to create the Slovak Republic anew – to go back, as it were, to the constitutional drawing board.

According to Milan Šutovec, the author of this proposal, today's political arrangement, like all previous Slovak Republics, is deeply flawed. Like the others, it was created by the wrong people at the wrong time. Apparently, Mr. Šutovec imagines it is possible to establish democracy with constitutional fixes or to develop rule of law by issuing a few decrees – as if the right political formula could put an end to moral confusion and the absence of shared norms. This view is gravely mistaken. Even the most civil constitution cannot conjure up a civil society. A constitution that respects liberal-democratic norms can take root only where a civil society already exists or where there is sufficient will to develop one. Likewise, the rule of law cannot be made by laws alone, because laws are only the formal codification of social rules which already enjoy a measure of social recognition. Establishing the apparatus of state, as even Slovak experience shows, is not that difficult. Creating a democratic government, however, is an altogether different matter. Among other things, this requires getting the right fit between institutions and citizens, a task that is far more demanding. It might be true that Slovakia suffers from a flawed constitution and poorly designed laws. But even if we were to write a new constitution every four years, not much would change. Each new Republic would likely display a strong continuities with the one it was designed to replace. In truth, the main cause of our current crisis lies not in our constitution and laws, however bad, but in our tired and overburdened citizenry, in our peculiar politicians, and in intellectuals who are bereft of new ideas.

Democracy, as John Dewey once wrote, is not a form of government but a way of life. A society's experience, its tradition, and its culture, provide the constitutive elements of its political institutions. A democratic and civil state can function only where there is a fundamental consensus about the proper relationship between citizen and state, and this consensus is at root a matter of culture. Culture makes possible the definite forms that power takes, wrote Michel Foucault, it makes power intelligible by providing the mechanisms through which to decode and apprehend the social world. Culture plays a key role in shaping our social relations, it helps us to select out those others with whom we agree as well as those with whom we are otherwise unable or unwilling to agree.

Samuel Huntington has defined civilization as, "the highest cultural community of people, the broadest level of culture with which people can identify". Western civilization, in his view, differs from the other seven – or perhaps eight – civilizations that together define our world. The West is distinguished by its rationality, originating in ancient Greece, by its Christian values, and by its particular attachment to the rule of law, social pluralism, civil society, and human rights. These differences are the result of centuries of unfolding and are, he maintains, much more decisive than the differences that obtain among political ideologies and political



regimes. Huntington proclaims that "the differences among civilizations have replaced political and ideological divisions from the time of the Cold War as the potential dividing lines of future clashes".

It is hard to say how accurate Huntington's description of other civilizations may be, but as far as his characterization of the West – and especially Europe – is concerned, there is more than a little wishful thinking at play. In fact, the history of western civilization is replete with its share of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and religious wars. The Trojan war ended in genocide. The religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries were accompanied by their own pre-modern variant of ethnic cleansing. Our own century has witnessed two world wars and a Holocaust without historical parallel. "No other continent is harder to define nor is historically more heterogeneous than Europe", remarked Timothy Garton Ash recently, "and no other continent has come up with more projects as to how it should be governed". From a historical perspective, the rule of law, civil society, and the defence of human rights are more European projections than European reality. These are constructs that Europeans devised in order to protect themselves – not against the onslaught of alien civilizations but against the dangers inherent in their own.

For the Central European reader, the idea that he or she should feel threatened by Islamic, Chinese, Japanese or even Buddhist civilization seems rather farfetched. True, there may be some compelling reasons for Slovaks to feel threatened by Russia, as Ján Šafránek recently argued. In my view, however, the more threatening lines of inter-civilizational conflict exist elsewhere in Slovakia. That division runs between those who identify with the idea of a united, democratic Europe which respects human rights and those like Ján Slota, leader of the Slovak Nationalist Party, who adhere to a Christian and nationalist vision, who celebrate the exclusive character of national economies, cultures, and traditions, and who believe that these national qualities have the capacity to ward off globalization and the filthy enlightenment tradition. Given today global realities, only a short-sighted politician could dream about the "uniqueness of national economies". Money has no national identity, just as drugs, weapons and carbon dioxide do not observe the niceties of border controls. Global resources, and these include Slovakia, are increasingly controlled by a remarkably small number of people, people who have managed to evade the control of national jurisdictions and who are thus quite beyond the will of electorates. The profits of international drug cartels are said to be roughly equivalent to the combined GNP of Germany and France. At the same time, the international sale and distribution of weapons is far better organized than are international efforts at arms control. Mechanisms for money laundering now constitute a transnational industry which easily escapes the reach of national law enforcement agencies. No country's law can today prevent a rise in temperature caused by the emission of carbon dioxide from cars and factories located in another, nor can such laws ensure the safety of its citizens from unsafe nuclear power plants across a nearby border. Crime of all kinds is becoming international. Under such threats, it is difficult to imagine a more effective defence of national resources and culture than that which is available through global economic and political integration and adherence to international legal norms. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine a greater barrier to this beneficial integration than a country that is as deeply divided by its collective political passions as Slovakia is today.

In the foreseeable future, writes Huntington, the chances for convergence into any universal civilization will be remote; the world will continue to be divided among competing civilizations. Much will depend on whether and how well the world civilizations can learn to coexist peacefully. Much will also depend on how the contest between multiculturalist and monoculturalist visions is played out. While accepting the reality of global heterogeneity, Huntington is highly critical of the universalizing thrust of western, and specifically American, aspirations to spread democracy and a tolerance of diversity throughout the globe. He is no less critical of the American embrace of multiculturalism at home. As he argues: "Multiculturalism at home threatens the United States and the West; universalism abroad threatens the West and the world. Both deny the uniqueness of Western culture. The global monoculturalists want to make the world like America. The domestic multiculturalists want to make America like the world. A multicultural world is unavoidable because global empire is impossible. The preservation of the United States and the West requires the renewal of Western identity. The security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturalism." (p.318)

In Europe, however, the proposition is reversed: dangerous are those who are monoculturalists at home and multiculturalists abroad. It is this nationalist formula which has generated much of the blood and destruction of the last century. This danger has not disappeared, it has merely taken on a more contemporary look. Whereas classical nationalists sought to keep their stock pure, today their successors seek pure national cultures. Where traditional racists categorized individuals according to physical attributes, their postmodern cohorts sort people according to their "cultural identity" – a postmodern euphemism for their postmodern racism. Racists of the past stressed the supposedly unbridgeable gap between lower and higher races, declaring that "inferior others" polluted the master race and, therefore, must be either subdued or crushed. The new racists have shifted their focus to the supposedly unbridgeable differences between cultures, proclaiming: "Let those live with us, who are like us; let those who are different, keep to themselves".

The dilemma about which Huntington writes is neither as exaggerated or as obvious as his various critics have claimed. For better or for worse, different traditions, customs, and "identities" are here to stay and must somehow be acknowledged. The problem is how best to do so, since the recognition and promotion of cultural diversity carries the potential for social catastrophe, when, as is too often the case, cultural differences are abused for political ends.

In his *Notes on Nationalism*, George Orwell offered a fanciful solution to the problem of collective passions: a regimen of voluntary vaccinations. For the afflicted citizen, harmful emotions would be suppressed by injections of harmless substitutes: a shot of patriotism, for example, to ward off nationalism, a dose of civic religion to inoculate against religious fundamentalism, and so on. In this way, the worse evil would be replaced by the lesser one. Of course, the question remains as to who would freely choose to undergo such a cure. Huntington proposes a remedy of a different – and more feasible – sort: search out whatever it is that people of distinct traditions, customs, and identities may share in common, and from this basis endeavour to build common political rules and legal norms. When compared to the practical problems which they have in common, their remaining differences may prove less significant. Still, as Huntington underscores, there will be limits. No law can compel a catholic, heterosexual, and paternalistic Slovak to like Hungarians, Gypsies, Jews, heterosexuals or feminists. Attitudes towards other people simply cannot be legislated. They are a matter of individual dispositions and broader socialization. At the same time, however, the law must not be made to benefit the privileged few to the exclusion of the rest. To be worthy of the name, a state ruled by law is one in which all persons are treated equally, without regard to their ethnic, religious, racial or political affiliations.

Finally, I would like to return to Ján Slota and his remark that when "...a liberal unites with a conservative or a social democrat. ...it is sickening. Globalization is particularly dangerous for small nations". On the contrary, I believe that only deeper integration with the wider world can help us to address the practical problems that currently burden our society. Only such integration can protect our country from the clash of civilizations at home as well as abroad.

Translated from Slovak by **Samuel Abrahám**