



# **In the Land of the Hyphen: Jan Budaj and 'fictional culture' in Slovakia before the Split**

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In British thinking, Czechoslovakia usually means the northern lands of Bohemia and, above all, the enchanting city of Prague. When we hear about Slovakia in the south, we get only the scantiest information from which to build a picture. We probably remember Dubcek, who spent his years of internal exile there, and also the fact that the Semtex explosive favoured by terrorists the world over was manufactured there. Add a vague recollection of wartime fascism, together with more recent reports of resurgent national chauvinism, and it is immediately clear why we should have been disposed to share Prague's superior and exasperated smile at the famous problem of the hyphen that the Slovaks - in what has been widely portrayed as a fit of Balkanizing pettiness - wanted to insert into the name of the new post-communist state.

I first visited Slovakia in 1979, and have since maintained a fitful exchange with a circle of people in the capital city of Bratislava. As the revolutionary wave swept through last November I was especially interested to see the emergence of Jan Budaj, a stoker-intellectual who, having helped catalyse events on the streets of Bratislava, went on to become leader of Public Against Violence, the Slovak sister of Prague's Civic Forum, and the deputy leader of the transitional Parliament formed to take Slovakia into next week's elections.

When I first met Budaj in the early eighties—'lost times' as he now dismisses them with a smile that warns against any retrospective romance—he already had considerable standing in the cultural opposition. In a way that would only seem paradoxical in the west, Budaj was both an avant-gardist and a vehement guardian of tradition.



As the contriver of a series of renegade installations and 'happenings', Budaj had spent the seventies pursuing a cultural guerrilla war against the Communist regime on the streets of Bratislava. Drawing on such sources as Conceptual Art, Duchamp and Dada, Budaj set out to demonstrate the lies on which Communist 'reality' was built.

He hung his own renegade version of the conventional slogan-ridden red banner on a prominent public building in Bratislava: it bore the obligatory red star and a completely meaningless jumble of letters, and the success with which it proved its point could be counted through the many weeks that passed before the authorities recognised it as a fake and ordered its removal. He produced highly realistic official posters advertising cultural events which could never happen in Bratislava—a concert by Abba and Bob Dylan, or the coming of Ingmar Bergman's latest film. Box offices were inundated.

Budaj's 'Fictional Culture' included a number of disorientating performances in public places. For the most memorable of these Budaj got hold of a market stall and set up a 'shop of the future' in one of Bratislava's oldest streets. At that time the schools were still trying to seduce children with a promise of heaven on earth. Teachers were insisting that when Communism was finally perfected, there would be no need for money: people would be able to walk into plentiful shops and simply take whatever they needed. Budaj's 'shop of the future' offered a mocking realisation of this sweet dream. It was stocked with whatever Budaj could find that really was available free within the system - pencils, pins, paper napkins and such-like - and it drew a large crowd. But despite the vehement urgings of Budaj and his assistants, no one could believe that these modest offerings were really there for the taking. Eventually a man from a nearby phone-box came up asking to borrow a pencil for a moment. After some persuasion he finally agreed to take one for free. There was immediately a stampede and in seconds the stall had been stripped bare.

These works of 'Fictional Culture' were hardly kind to their audiences. As counter-manipulations, they lured people into a confrontation with their own submission to Communism's faked-up version of reality, but they never got round to offering any answers. When I looked through Budaj's photographs of these events I was reminded of a certain haughtiness that I'd seen elsewhere in the cultural opposition.

By the early eighties, Budaj was moving onto ground that would prove altogether more fertile. The privileged Soviet tourists brought up from Budapest on cruise-ships were still being encouraged to think of Bratislava as 'a jewel in the Danube's crown', but in reality the place was an environmental disaster area. Huge industrial complexes ensured that the air often had a thick chemical smell and there was rising concern about the miscarriage and infant mortality rates. The population was being stacked up in massive peripheral estates of system-built tower blocks, while the remains of the old city were threatened by neglect and official vandalism.

Budaj was full of stories about the destruction of his city, and he had already chosen the issue on which to make a new kind of public stand. The mayor was promoting a scheme to 'renovate' Bratislava's 19th century cemeteries (both Catholic and Jewish), turning them into proper secular parks. The mayor's department described the cemeteries as valuable open spaces, claiming that the removal of the gravestones would make them into more useful public amenities. But Budaj saw a less public spirited logic at work. He photographed the bulldozers as they started ripping up the old marble stones.



Photo: Jan Budaj, 1982

He also noticed that the stones which were heaped up by the side of the cemetery during the day, were disappearing at night. Making the most of the fact that environmental issues were not then seen as wholly oppositional and knowing the strength of religious feeling in Slovakia, Budaj launched his protest through official channels, printing an article in a paper that stressed the importance of conservation even in superior 'progressive' societies like his own, identified the laws that the mayor's department was breaking by taking bulldozers into the cemeteries, and asked where the vanishing gravestones were going.

Public concern was such that the mayor's department felt obliged to stop the destruction and even offer an explanation: it claimed that the disappearing stones, which were almost certainly being sold for re-use in the west, had actually been ground up and sprinkled on the roads as a replacement for winter salt.

The cultural side of opposition life has flowered since the revolution of last November. Public Against Violence is based in one of Bratislava's old streets, in a building called Mozart House, and its HQ feels more like an arts centre than the administrative HQ of a campaigning political party. People come and go in a constant stream, and conversations about organisation and electoral tactics are



Inside PAV's Mozart House (June 1990)

susceptible to diversions. Andrej Bartosiewicz is in charge of international relations but, as a science fiction enthusiast who ten years ago was setting up a readers' club, he is easily drawn into a conversation about Ursula LeGuin.

Public Against Violence was quick to establish its own publishing house (Archa), and has sent numerous historians and researchers into long-forbidden archives to establish the truth about the Communist years. Its sociologists have produced an analysis of how the revolution came about. There were, as a paper explains, a number of small groups, institutions and individuals which composed 'islands of positive deviation' in the system. These 'islands' included nature conservationists, environmentalists, students, actors, writers, painters, scholars and doubtless also science fiction readers, and for years they had been formulating an 'unofficial definition of the state of society'.

There had been no need for these 'islands of positive deviation' to plan or confer; when the moment came they suddenly fused and the synergy created the 'critical



mass of systemic changes' that was necessary to turn the whole place over. No mention of Gorbachev there . . .

Ladislav Snopko is universally known as 'Agnes'. I vaguely remember sharing a drunken coma with him in a mountain hotel many years ago, but he is now Public Against Violence's Minister of Culture in the Slovak National Assembly, wide awake and full of ideas. I asked him what would be done with the red stars, the sculptures of Soviet soldiers and the other memorials that the Communists had stuck up all over the country. Agnes thought it would be a good idea to concentrate these works - which did, after all, represent a period in Slovakia's history - in an open-air museum, a kind of theme park devoted to Stalinism. The perfect site had been found at Leopoldov, a prison which a few months ago had been destroyed by rioting convicts.

I attended the opening of a new private gallery in Bratislava: a cavernous gravel-floored cellar which, for its first exhibition, had been filled with abysmal works of official socialist realism from the fifties. The pictures, which were displayed alongside red slogan-ridden banners from the period ('Look, my son, Electricity!'), raised the clichés of Stalinism to a polished pseudo-academic finish. Heroic workers strode without faltering up the hill of history, their muscles hard as iron and their wheel-barrows heaped high. A young and 'representative' couple gazed admiringly over a monstrous building site (this was entitled 'The Construction of the Metal Refinery'). A picture called 'In the Nursery' showed infants following collective pursuits under the guidance of state nurses dressed in pure, symbolic white. There was even a hymn of praise to Micturin, the Soviet geneticist whose work promised a huge increase in the size of fruits: a painting called 'Little Micturins' showed two young girls studying a branch of blossom and dreaming of cherries the size of plums while the mountains of Slovakia reclined patriotically behind them.



The Communist Party remains true to this tradition of Stalinist kitsch even if it has given up on Micturin; it had just come up with a new logo for the election campaign, a bunch of cherries: red, sweet but also reassuringly small. But the



exhibition, which was entitled 'Great Dream', was all about winning distance. At the opening, somebody read out a report from the fifties describing how the highest peak in the High Tatras was to be renamed Stalin's peak as a celebration of the Great Leader's seventieth birthday. A Slovak tenor saxophonist, known for his work with Anthony Braxton in Paris, then embarked on an improvisation which took the most famous Communist tunes of the fifties and cut them up into mournful melodic fragments which could only die away in the air.

As a citizens' movement with roots in the cultural opposition, Public Against Violence has a genius for resounding proclamations, and was in its element when leading huge expeditions out to the border with Austria to tear down the frontier and turn all that murderous barbed wire into great heart-shaped sculptures. But one can only put so much Lennonism in the place of deformed Leninism. After that, it is time to form a practical government and the symbolic gesture is no longer enough.

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I arrived in Bratislava on the day PAV launched its election campaign. It did so with a popularity rating that had fallen dramatically: from 40 per cent in January to a mere 13 per cent at the beginning of May—a long way behind the right-wing Christian Democrats, led by Jan Czarnogursky, and only on a par with the Social Democrats and the Greens and more or less level with the Communists.

PAV leaders attributed this dramatic decline to the difficulties of their first encounters with the real political world. To begin with there was public concern that the movement had been infiltrated by Communists. In the early days a lot had jumped ship into Public Against Violence as it organised at factory level, and further damage had been done by the failure of PAV's attempt to take over the leadership of the Slovak National Assembly (Budaj is deputy leader, but the Communist leader managed to hold his position).

Additionally, the transitional government was pushing for measures, such as a reduction in the arms industry, that would lead to job losses. They hadn't done too well out of the hyphen affair either: it was estimated that PAV had lost 5 per cent because it had failed to take a fully separatist line in its talks with Prague. A lot was going to depend on PAV's newly selected candidates. The training sessions had just begun, and I joined a party going to the provincial town of Martin so that I could watch one in action.



Martin was once the centre of a thriving regional culture, but it has since been refocussed in orthodox communist terms. The red banners may have gone but the main square still has its conventional statue—a bronze cluster of upheld guns, designed to identify postwar communism with the anti-fascist partisans of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944. Our destination was just round the corner, in a conference hall among the high-rise housing that ensures the rest of the town looks like Haggerston, albeit smartened up and with snow-brushed coniferous mountains thrown into the background.

The candidates were already assembled, as was one of the young American advisers, undiminished survivors of Mike Dukakis's catastrophic presidential campaign, who had come over to help organise Public Against Violence's election drive. These 'Volunteers for Democracy' were flexible as well as enthusiastic. They were quite happy to forgo such standard techniques of American electioneering as the direct mailshot and the phone-bank. Nevertheless, one only had to enter the conference room to see what they were up against.

To start with, how do you run a properly interactive training session in a hall built for the meetings of a Stalinist Party? The layout was entirely inflexible, insisting that the day must be conducted as one long plenary session. The seats were banked up in fixed rows, and in front was a huge and equally immovable podium built to accommodate the full hierarchy of this or that governing council. It was from this vantage point that the Party shepherds were accustomed to peering out over their faithful flock, pastured in terraces which ascended to a back wall decorated with a piece of ideologically correct art.

As the eye-catchers of official communist perspective, these dismal works were designed less to inspire than to ornament torpor, to ease the wandering committee mind back into line, to reaffirm all the third-rate clichés of the Party position. One of the two halls in Martin featured a sculptural frieze showing the conventional dove of peace flying out of the mouth of Soviet man; the other had a foul and garishly rendered allegory in which the good Communist woman stayed at home with her children and her loaf of bread, while the men marched forward to drive their steeled fists into the bellies of hook-nosed, bowler-hatted American capitalists who reeled back under this heroic onslaught, dropping their money bags and spilling golden dollars on the ground.



The problem of the room was dwarfed as the day got underway. To begin with, there were major uncertainties about what it meant to be a candidate in the elections. Some of these fledgling politicians had their own doubts about the ethics of campaigning. They felt distinctly uneasy about bending the truth, or framing it for the sake of electoral 'presentation': they certainly hadn't gone through all the changes of the last six months simply in order to stand up in front of the public and tell a pack of electorally convenient lies to potential voters.

The campaign managers were keen to quell these anxieties, but they also had to establish that a candidate must be prepared to do some work. They wanted to see the candidates out there in the constituencies, walking the streets and pressing the flesh in true western style, knocking on doors and arguing the point on policy. In order to achieve this they had to win a clear break with tradition. There had been 'candidates' in the communist system, but the role was entirely passive, an externally endowed honour which could be worn like a medal and came with accompanying privileges.

Even vehement anti-communists who knew the corruption of this state of affairs found it difficult to make the transition. How, as they asked, would the new electorate respond to such an active approach? The years of communism had left people suspicious of the stranger who knocks on the door or approaches them in the street: only the police and the mentally ill did this, and since the police were now altogether more circumspect, it looked as if the candidates were being asked to behave like lunatics.

A sympathetic Slovak psychologist suggested ways in which candidates might ease their way through these problems: telling them how to harmonise their body language with their spoken message, how to gauge their audience, and how to deal with silence or the genuinely critical questioning they could expect.



Still in the first week of the campaign, the American advisers seemed less patient: exasperated by the absence of a proper work ethic among their volunteer translators and assistants, they were already trying to buck people up with a quotation from JFK: 'ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.'

Halfway through the Martin conference some of the leaders of Public Against Violence arrived to resolve any uncertainties that might exist over election policies. There was some discussion of PAV's printed election manifesto: how come it made no mention of tourism - the obvious growth industry of the future - and what did all this airy talk about 'self-realization' for Slovakia actually amount to?

Jan Budaj, who wears his suit with greater ease than Havel ever did, answered questions. Ecological urgency had led the transitional government to order the imminent closure of a number of polluting paper mills, and there were plans to establish a free-standing Ministry of the Environment. He remarked that PAV was determined to treat the problems of Slovakia's half million gypsies as a political rather than merely social issue. He assured candidates - some of whom looked less than convinced - that there would be no attack on the cost of living on the road from the command economy to the free market, although prices would be made real through the different areas of the economy. The crown would be made convertible, and strikes would be legal except for certain groups.

The Interior Minister added that he hoped people would develop forms of symbolic protest that were not economically damaging, such as hunger strikes. A woman asked how PAV could claim to represent the problems of women when only 10 per cent of its candidates were women. After pointing out that this imbalance was also true of the Christian Democrats' list, Budaj went on to explain that candidates had been selected locally, and that centralized quotas had been avoided as too reminiscent of Communist practice. Czechoslovakia had a higher percentage of working women than any other country in the world but their undiminished obligations in the home ensured that this 'liberation' had actually just added to their burden: under communism, it had been the lot of women to work two shifts each day. The problem extended far beyond the candidates list. A thoroughgoing women's movement should be established as part of PAV's longer term programme.



Budaj urged candidates not to stake everything on the election result, stressing that the campaign should be taken as a broader opportunity to continue to build PAV as a citizen's movement that would prove valuable however the election turned out for individual candidates. Rather than criticizing the policies of rival parties, they should base their campaign on their own plans and achievements to date. The Christian Democrats were ahead in the polls and had the support of the priests, but PAV could still hope to win over some of their supporters, not by attacking their views head on, but by building its programme up from around local and concretely defined issues with which everyone could identify: nursery provision, employment that was suitable for mothers, improvements in the condition of family life, the safety of public space.

I finally caught up with Budaj on the drive back from Martin. He told me that in some respects the worst problem facing Public Against Violence was that it had won its political demands in a single month. Unlike Solidarity in Poland, it had not had the time to build an organisational structure, while the movement was being redefined as a locally based response to the many social and ecological problems which formed the legacy of communism.

PAV would also be rebuilt as a political party. Party and movement must work together but they would also operate in different arenas and serve different purposes. There had been moments of tension as these differences became clear. PAV was full of intellectuals who liked to tease out intricacies and turn every decision-making meeting into a seminar on principle. Budaj was among those who had offended against this participative culture in order to produce a practical programme and leadership. As he put it, 'Like Havel, we started out believing that if policy was made by people who were morally sound it would be reliable and trusted. But it hasn't turned out this way. People hate policy; they don't trust it, no matter who makes it'. His experience in the Slovak parliament inclined him to believe that these reservations were justified: that the world of pragmatic politics would always be at odds with principle. Indeed, he described himself as the Robespierre of Slovakia's revolution.

Parties are bound to compromise, but Budaj is adamant that 'a movement alone can be a dangerous political subject. Its ideas are not voted on and they may not always actually present the views of the crowds that they inspire. Typically, movements come up with theses that are too round for anyone to protest against, so the leaders can do what they wish'. As someone who had been around at the beginning of several movements, Budaj felt that he understood their weaknesses.



He is not one to talk ambitiously about finding a third way between capitalism and socialism; instead, his utterances are all about catching up or, as he puts it with slight exaggeration, with 'finishing the last national revolution in Europe'. This brought us back to what Budaj assured me was the misunderstood case of the hyphen. I asked how his project for a democratic restructuring of society was going to settle with the separatist dream of an independent Slovak state. Was this just 'reactionary nationalism' of the sort that we are so quick to condemn in the west?

Budaj replied that it was hardly surprising that a nation which is possessed of an original culture should emerge from communism talking about the possibility of autonomous existence. Like other leaders of Public Against Violence, Budaj stressed that he thought a proper federal relationship with the Czechs could be re-established, but he was adamant that the argument over the hyphen only sounds bad when it is explained badly. 'We are not really fighting for a hyphen. Our real concern is to make Slovakia visible to the world. We want to be equal partners, as we were when Masaryk's democratic federal state was established in 1918.'

Since then, the federal state had been turned into an all-powerful instrument of control, and no-one was defending it in its present form. Sadly, however, new tensions had emerged between Bratislava and Prague since the November revolution. These had almost come to a head over Havel's recent presidential visit to Israel. Havel took two planeloads of staff with him, but it was only after considerable pressure through PAV that three Slovaks had been added. This had seemed particularly insensitive in Bratislava, especially considering the wartime deportation of Slovakia's Jews to Nazi concentration camps. PAV eventually went with a proposal to involve Israeli historians in research into the murky collaboration between the Nazis and the independent Slovak state.

But the national question is volatile, and the big question for Public Against Violence in the approaching election is whether its project of a practical democracy, carefully extended to include the gypsy and Hungarian minorities can hold out against more vivid visions of Slovakia that have been flaring up all around it.

A few weeks earlier the residents of Bratislava only had to look up to see the Pope flying around in a helicopter blessing their city: a miracle, as everyone



agreed, but not one that was calculated to improve Public Against Violence's chances in the forthcoming election. There was the tub-thumping chauvinism of the Slovak National Party, with its expatriate supporters in Munich and its American clerics who talk like petty Ayatollahs about 'Czech perfidy', and appeal to their elderly supporters' laundered and bucolic childhood memories of the independent Slovak state. But it was the Christian Democrats who appeared to be coming across as the legitimate heirs of that potent historical legacy. Their party was led by the two Carnogursky brothers, and in the background was their father, a former minister in the independent Slovak state who is said to be a vehement separatist to this day. Nobody in PAV had any time for the allegation, implied by a number of western newspapers, that the elder Czarnogursky had been a fascist.

It would be quite wrong, as I was told repeatedly, to draw any such conclusion until the history of that government's collaboration with the Nazis had been properly researched: the main thing at this stage was to secure the full defeat of the Communists. Perhaps it was only they who were trying to put the writing on the wall for Budaj.

I kept seeing it in Bratislava: scrawled and semi-literate lies denouncing Budaj as a Communist, a Hungarian, a conman who had taken millions of crowns from the state. That was fictional culture of a degenerate and, let's hope, negligible kind.

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