*Information about interviewee:*

*Béla Keszegh is the deputy mayor of Komárno, a town in Slovakia on the Slovakian-Hungarian border. The interview was conducted in Komárno, Slovakia.*

*R= Respondent – Béla Keszegh*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: What is the biggest challenge facing your town?

R: We used be on the borderline for a long time. For four decades for the periphery. Hungary used to be a socialist bloc. For example we could travel to Hungary in the communist times just twice a year. Because we are part of the Hungarian minority, we are obviously interested in going to theatre and so on, but we were limited in this kind of travelling of movement. We could have travelled in group. That was the reason why in that time is very popular to go to the theatre in groups. The basically there is a limitation and we are on the periphery. It is not just because it's a minority case on the borderline. No country tries real investments on the periphery. Especially in the Communist times. The periphery is where you had to put the military base. This is kind of hindering the economic growth of the region and the situation here, we had some Russian soldiers in a fort system, we have a beautiful fought support system and up to 1991 we had some Russian soldiers here, we didn't know how many. Then the system changed. Especially after the system change in the first decades, we had some conflict. In Slovakia we had a nationalist government, one side with certain history. A relatively young country. Trying to find itself and a new identity. It was only a Slovak Republic for six years; it was Czechoslovakia fur a few years. There were Slavs and checks around and so on because these facts, of course there was an idea let's do it let's build up the new nation. From 1998 there was the independent Slovak Republic, somehow it was good, but on the other hand within Czechoslovakia and Hungary and is were in a better position than they are in now. Because in the first decade they put this really nationalistic attitude into their policies. Then there was another milestone in the instance the European Union. The first years with the free movement was very important for us, because you can easily travel to areas where we want to go, it was especially important for us to travel south to Hungary. It was a huge change and a positive change among Hungary and Slovakia. And another important milestone was when we entered the Schengen treaty and then there was no control. Even when you entered into the European Union someone stopped you dance your passport and yours have that feeling that, if you go to the other side you go to another country. There was a mental borderline still. When we expected to go to the theatre and a natural circulation it hindered the whole process. So after entering the Schengen treaty another period started about 6 to 7 years ago started other periods when the minority issue started to decline in Slovakia. There are another partying governments, and Hungarian Slovak organisation, MOST-HIS, they clearly, they wanted a corporation with Hungarian Slovaks declared us. But when they entered the government their topic was not hot any more, when the entered it slow down the process. They don't have such a strong nationalist element and became not such an issue. The minority question was not such a hot topic anymore. Another radical party appeared, which tries to solve the Roma people and migration. And with this the political spectrum changed, the Hungarian from the top and now it declines, because of the migration issue even though Slovaks never seen a migrant they still have a strong opinion about it. They try to work with the emotion. Another interesting issue is the Roma minority because the number is increasing and all the municipalities have to solve this problem, but there are more Roma children in schools, and very often they have different lifestyles and very often there are conflicts. The Slovakian Hungarian problem is not so important anymore.

I: How would you describe the relationship between your city and the Hungarian state?

R: It is changing. It depends mostly on ongoing government and mostly between the relationship between the Slovakian and ongoing government. The right-wing parties in Hungary rather support the national minorities abroad, but there are periods in Hungary when there is a right-wing leadership and then left-wing parties. Left-wing parties say we're hungry you are there you belong to Slovakia, okay we are proud is, but you are there we are here. It's a simple way of saying but that's the thing. The right-wing parties say you are a Fellows is our priority, we have to take care of you, because of common history, my roots, and so on. But in the first decade after the change again, the right-wing parties, because of their Slovak national parties, there were conflicts between them it was very bad for us. They say you are stupid know you are stupid you are stupid know your stupid. If you are still between two people spitting at each other, you get spent on yourself. And there were some right-wing parties who are not so keen on this topic. But the recent Hungarian government appeared, but the relationship with the Slovak government changed. Fico and Orbán have a perfect political relationship because of political reasons. In spite of that was to have so many problems, they don't make any complex anymore and because of this fact, there are no such conflicts as they used to be. For example, it was always a hot issue when Hungary did something, now politicians and newspapers are not interested any more. For example there is a Hungarian football team here in Slovakia, many people go there, now they start to sing the Hungarian national anthem, this would have been a problem a few years ago now no one cares. No one really cares and exchanged the whole thing. They say let's play football, it's rubbish football. To return to your question, specifically, there are a lot of policies which give the Hungarian community a lot of money, because they are interested in this topic. They have scholarships et cetera. All these guys around have the right to vote and it is quite good feel for them, because all these people would naturally votes right-wing parties, because these are the guys that vote for us because they care for us. Further younger in economies goods that they have certain links that they have smaller links to medium and small enterprises, they speak the language, we can spread the business easily, there's no language problem in Romania and Slovakia, and you can find guys and speak my language in the other language. They understand the culture. It has very specific reasons, why they try to speed up or spread their national policy. We can feel that more money could come from Hungary from Budapest and they clearly say we try to help you to make business to become stronger. And because this new relationship between the Slovakian and ongoing governments there is no really conflict. We will see this is what's happening at the moment. We will see how it will go.

I: Did people here still take Hungarian citizenship?

R: We don't have statistics on that. People understand that they can take it, but if they tell openly, then they'll lose their Slovak citizenship, which is not what they want. They feel that it will make a problem and cause problems. In spite of the fact that even the Hungarian citizenship in Slovakia could in same thing because the EU. Nobody wants a conflict. Nobody wants to solve things with the policy. Okay I’m proud of it. I can go to Budapest. We don't have numbers. We know those that are getting lost their citizenship here but is not a significant number a few hundred. Obviously, there are significantly more that have taken citizenship. The only people that would have the data are probably in Budapest the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but it is very sensitive data because they know those that admit to taking Hungarian citizenship will lose their Slovak citizenship, so we do not have the data.

I: Are there targets for the economic development?

R: A few weeks ago, they are making surveys were what would be the best of this investment. According to locations, which location could be stronger, there are some natural programs, old historic buildings, castles, old buildings. There are some obvious programs, like let's help with the cultural aspects, theatre, NGOs. In the field of economy, it can be the question. What is quite clear is they tried to help, the churches, especially the Reformation churches, is quite strong, is quite strong because of historical reasons. It is always been Hungarian even in Slovakia. There are not many reformed Slovaks, there are evangelistic. There are 13 Churches and almost all of them are Hungarian. Right-wing government support churches. That's the reason, it is somehow, part of the programme, they try to support these religious activities, within the Catholic Church, they try to form Hungarian NGOs that could somehow the number umbrella movement for Hungarian activities. There are many Catholics Hungarian but the Catholic Church as orders been quite nationalistic. So now we try to find a way to support the Hungarian Catholics in Slovakia. Cultural things, religious things, historical things an economic thing they will try to find the best way to support for things. There is the basic idea that if we get them stronger, as a minority group, we can stop assimilation, because a strong economic background can be a help stop assimilation. The only minorities can be strong, and avoid assimilation, are the ones that I economically strong. If you go to Barcelona their rich, the Spanish government says we want you, because it's a strong economic region. If you have a strong economic background it is much easier, because if there is a tendency, and Slovakia for example, during the communist times, always the southern region was economic weaker. All the aid went to the northern part. And people thought if we don't assimilate, we won't be successful, there was an unconscious message, if you assimilate you can be successful. And that's what the policy wanted to make you think, but if you join us you can be successful, and if you don't you can suffer. Very simplified way of saying nothing, but that was the problem. So that's the reason why now we try to balance, economic diversity and that's the reason why there are some programs and state subsidies from the Hungarian government.

I: Do you believe these policies are conducted to attract Hungarians to Hungary?

R: Definitely there is a clear message, from the Hungarian government that there is a strong demographic decline. So now the studies programs and things. But they say we do not want migrants, we want people that we know, people we could trust. Trust in inverted commas. And this can be a natural way to fill up and get to the number we used to have before, but it is very dangerous. There is a big Hungarian community abroad, nearly 2 million people. And if they moved to Hungary, you will get the skeleton of the community, and it will cause a huge problem. I don't think there is a very obvious message that I want to take you. With this, they just speed up the assimilation, and the problems of that minority group, and nobody be happy about that. So I think that there is a natural way of taking some people, and if they go to Budapest to university they just stay there. They could be Hungarian, its beautiful city especially someone goes from here. Universities are better, why would they stay here, they just stay there. I don't think there is a clear message. I don't think they want to take these people. There is a natural amount, which they cannot slow down, but what they really want is to strengthen these minorities, because it is much better for Hungary if there are some people around. It makes the country bigger somehow. Because those communities can attract other businesses from Hungary, and so on and so on. It is better if there is another Hungarian university here so on. And all those fields are bigger any field. If you want a better footballer, the field is bigger the source. For example, at certain times the tax system was better in Slovakia, and so many Hungarian companies took advantage of that and came here to Slovakia. So can be really effective.

I: Was there ever any territorial autonomy ambition?

R: It is a desire. When you lose something, there is a small desire to change it back. But if we are realistic it is not a real thing anymore. These feelings were stronger when there is a strict borderline now people know is not realistic. Why would they take conflicts if there is a free movement? I don't think it's a number one issue anymore. They don't think the fact that it could change again, we could have borderlines again. But this moment, it won't just have their lives, people can move a little further if they want, they can live in Hungary. It's not a very hot issue anymore. If you're Hungarian you always have inside it was good, it would be great, but is not something you would like to solve. This territory used to be Hungarian of course. And Hungary would like to get back again. That is not an issue anymore for NGOs or politicians. They do not speak about it anymore. They say we have a right to them the European Union that we are to fight for. Autonomy is a hot issue, not territorial autonomy, the educational or cultural. We are 10% of the population, this so give us 10% of the budget for culture. Why you are telling me what kind of theatre I want to have. I want the Hungarian things to teach, so we should decide. So rather is moving towards a realistic way. So recently there is a Slovak party, they double the budget for Hungarian culture. They are moving towards a minority autonomy in the field of culture and education and positive discrimination as well. In some reasons there is a small community with a small school, and they need extra subsidies to survive. So if we try to slow down assimilation any positive discrimination in this way.

I: Do you have a good relationship with Komárno?

R: Yes, we have a very positive, good relationship with good communication. We have a special case, because we have the same name and we are split down the middle. We have more of an important history for Hungary here in the Slovakian side, all the buildings, and statues are important for hungry. We have very good cooperation relationship; we have festivals and sports and any kind of cooperation we use European funds to build cycle routes and to develop or renovate fort system. There is a very natural link between both sides, so the corporation is very good at this moment.

I: Do you receive political support from the Hungarian state?

R: Yes. but when we solve problems of municipality, we don't really need political support. For everyday things. Now we've heard about these programs that means some money could come into the region, to help sell activities, economic activities, or renovating or developing activities. In this case we are really happy about it. We will have our life, we will solve our things, we go to Bratislava to solve things adult ministries. So in this case we sold different kind of issues, so we don't really need help, because we don't solve national things, such as rights of things is always on a local level. If it is small issue, we try to solve ourselves, but not with the help of Hungarian government.

I: Will you be involved in the investment committees?

R: Yes, we will be asked certain questions and things. Yes within the Hungarian community, Komárno, has a very important position. sometimes it is called the Hungarian community capital in Slovakia. You cannot avoid us in this way, and yes so will be asked, from Bratislava from Budapest, we would like to have a nice beautiful city to develop and attract businesses. But not in such a level that makes conflicts, but to make a nice corporation and coexistence of people and we get some national help from Budapest we are happy. We don't think that we have to use our Hungarian culture against someone, they can coexist together, I'm very happy to speak Slovak to read Slovakian literature, it gives you something extra. It is not feeling any more that you have to choose that they can be nice together.

I: Is there any campaigning conducted here in Komárno?

R: Some Slovak parties made a bit, but it was a very typical, the Slovaks didn't like it very much. Through national Hungarian TV channels, they are physically not here, but they send their information. Because most Hungarians watch hunger in TV channels, not because the language, but it is a bigger country, there are more TV channels, a wider range of stupid programs. And you turn and there is a news speaker is saying vote this, do that. It is not typical that they come here and campaign in their full stadiums et cetera, it is rather through the TV channels. And because the double citizenship conflict, it was not very active in Slovakia, it is much more active in Romania and Transylvania, more Hungarian voters. totally different in Romania. In Serbia again, a small community, a bit different background, in Slovakia if you say autonomy people get nervous, but in Serbia because of Yugoslavia, autonomy, so what? It was built out of autonomous regions. And everywhere you can find autonomy's offices and so on, hear people say, you want to take the territory you want to country and so on. In Austria, there is a small community, the standard of living was very high, and it wasn't an issue and some people assimilated. If there is no conflict between two groups and slowly, they just assimilate, is something very natural, the bigger assimilates the smaller one. In Austria it was a process, in Romania they are a bit isolated and the numbers is bigger and because Hungary was more developed than Romania, because of some different background, and some different characteristics it was different. In Slovakia again, it has a long history, or rather there was a long history, so there was some compensation against minorities. All of them are a bit different all the countries with the ongoing minorities.

I: Is there a long-term goal with these engagement policies?

R: Definitely yes. It is ideological, but it has some certain advantages. As I mentioned cultural, economic, and if one knows that Mr Orbán loves football. They support clubs, just to get players from the bigger field. it is clear and obvious that there is a very real advantage for Hungary. He wants to think like a bigger country and give them support because there is an obvious and real advantage for Hungry. This is there is no doubt. The building next to us, for example, is a historical building in the most important square in the town. This renovation is being paid for solely by the Hungarian state, and they will move their NGOs and civil society organisations there.

I: What about your identity?

R: We are Hungarian. We sing the Hungarian national anthem. We support the Hungarian football team and we are happy about the Hungarian medals at the Olympics. We sometimes have to hear the Slovak national anthem and it is not that we are against Slovakia or their identity, but it is just that we deep down feel Hungarian and it is a very strong part of our identity. It is strange because when we travel somewhere, they ask us on a landing or immigration form to write our nationality, we write Hungarian, even though they then ask, but you have a Slovak passport. Okay, that is my citizenship, but my nationality is Hungarian. Most of them would not write their nationality as Slovak, citizenship is different from nationality.

I: The Hungarian media here in Komárno, is any of it directed to Hungarians in Slovakia?

R: There is one channel directed to the Hungarian diaspora globally. Many people moved in the 50, 60s so there are many people in Australia, America. There are many programmes about us and things and now they try to be a bit more. Now when you see a weather forecast it will give the weather for the territory a bit further outside of Hungary.