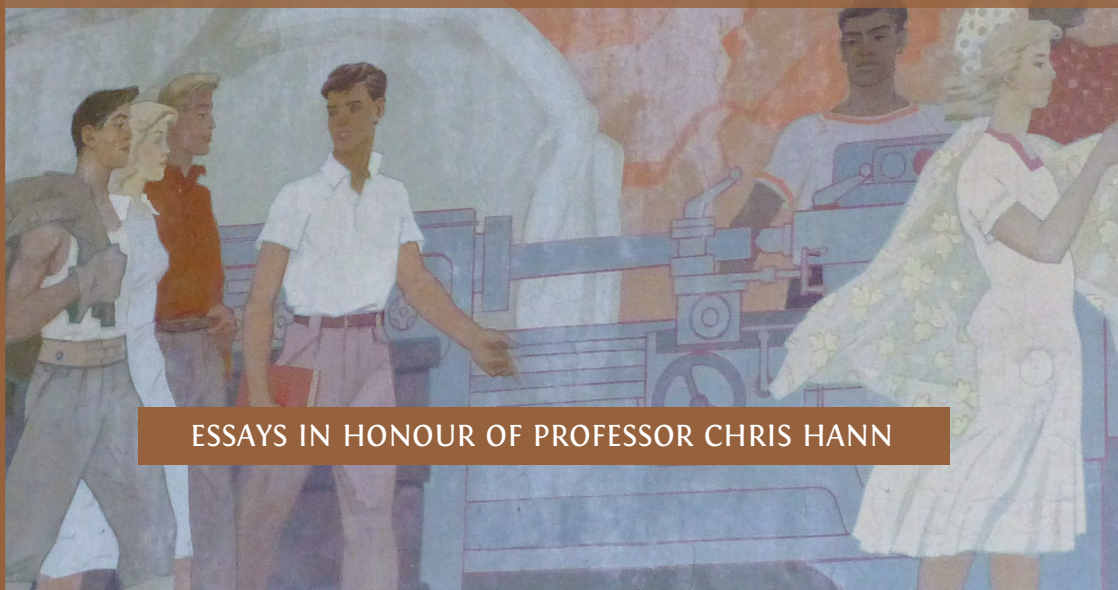




EDITED BY JURAJ BUZALKA AND AGNIESZKA PASIEKA

# ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

From Europe to Asia and Back



ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR CHRIS HANN



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Cover image: Lenin mural, House of Culture, Temirtau, Kazakhstan (2014). Photo by Tommaso Trevisani. Cover design by Katy Saunders.

# 8. Post-Peasant Progressivism

## On Liberal Tendencies in the Slovak Countryside<sup>1</sup>

*Juraj Buzalka*

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This essay follows Chris Hann's long-term interest in peasants and their transformations in East-Central Europe. It complements Hann's perspective on the introduction of post-socialist liberalism in Hungary by presenting some arguments about socialist and post-socialist politics in Slovakia. While Chris Hann has pointed out in particular the consolidation of reactionary right-wing populism under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie as a consequence of the introduction of free-market liberalism and the reduction of the role of the state in providing social welfare for the Hungarian population, my Slovak examples show that we need to pay equal attention to the values represented in what I call post-peasant progressivism—a kind of autochthonous liberalism—as an important component of social and political emancipation, complementing reactionary post-peasant populism. In short, I argue that the progressive elements have often been overlooked by analyses of post-socialist populism. In what follows, I shall first present my reading of Chris Hann's critique of post-socialist liberalism. This will be followed by my understanding of populist developments in Slovakia and my own ethnography of progressivism from the perspective of the Slovak village and in relation to national politics. In the concluding section, I will reintegrate my argument that post-socialist populism has both reactionary and progressive moments.

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1 This text benefited greatly from years-long discussions with László Fosztó and from the generous critiques of anonymous reviewers of this volume.

## Populism and Transformations

Analysing the failure of the Polish state to collectivise the peasantry, Chris Hann (1985: 169) registered the persistence of peasantry and of a “peasant ethos” in rural, socialist south-east Poland. He also noticed similarities between the rural Solidarity movement of the 1980s and populist protests from before World War II. Hann was unsure as to what sort of populism could be preserved by modernised family farmers under state socialism, but he noticed in his “village without solidarity” that the only functioning community institution was the Roman Catholic Church. He wrote that “certainly the ethos has survived and peasants are united in their profound suspicion of the authorities,” and “peasant religiosity remains at a high level, ensuring that the Catholic Church remains the major solidifying force in local communities and in the nation” (Hann 1985: 176). It seems already in his early works from the 1980s that Hann was considering populism especially as a reactionary manifestation of the agrarian past.

In one of his numerous articles on post-socialist populism, which I, for the purpose of this text, choose to be representative of his arguments on the rise of post-socialist populism, Chris Hann (2020) stresses that illiberal processes in rural East-Central Europe “are driven by the collapse of socialist embourgeoisement and the emergence of a new national bourgeoisie under peripheral capitalism.” He claims that some of the moral responsibility for these developments lies with “the unwavering intellectual enthusiasts of abstract liberalism” (Hann 2020: 461). According to Hann, the major driving force behind this rise of illiberal populism is a specific version of market liberalism and neoliberalism. In his opinion, the vitality of liberal civil society—consisting of freedom of assembly, political pluralism and the rule of law—depends heavily on the political economy, for which the dismantling of the state was the most devastating development (Hann 2020: 461). As Hann argues, populists are against “civil society” or the “open society” exemplified in the liberal ideas of George Soros and all the NGOs supported by his network (Ibid.) In yet another argument, Hann (2020: 463) reiterates his analysis of the Polish village, arguing that the late state-socialist Solidarity movements against the workers’ state cannot be seen only as a path of ascendance towards democracy. Lemkos and Ukrainians in south-eastern Poland in the 1980s, the minority autochthonous

population in the region, suffering from dominant Polish nationalism, “preferred the securities and relative freedom they enjoyed under a weak socialist government to a social movement of the ascending Polish nationalists” (2020: 463). As Hann summarises, these undemocratic parameters of the Solidarity movement “were very far from promoting social tolerance and unlikely to serve the long-term interests of the working class” (Hann 2020: 463). He also points out (Ibid.) regarding post-1989 developments that “larger numbers of citizens found that some of their freedoms were constrained in new ways.”

As Professor Hann further argues, one of the important deficiencies of post-socialist liberalism is intellectual elitism and the inability of liberal NGOs to go beyond the philosophy of governance based on cosmopolitan human rights and rule of law favouring individual private property. Some intellectuals whom Hann knew from late socialist Hungary “were able to socialise in pleasant cafés and obtain access to better material supplies through the astute use of their social and cultural capital” (Hann 2020: 462). Hann further argues that the new ideas of civil society not only created new elites, but that these interventions—at least in the case of Hungary—“were very short-term, leaving the local experts without any chance of building careers when the money ran out” (Hann 2020: 464). Western intellectuals promoting civil society in East-Central Europe had formed a “church” in Hann’s opinion, in the sense that it became impossible to question the paradigm (Ibid. 464). In this new, post-Cold War ideology, civil society functioned to reproduce a civilisational divide and contributed to deep-rooted antinomies, in particular by accelerating economic marginalisation (for further discussion on civil society, see also Hann and Dunn 1996).

Hann also refers to the life and work of rural intellectuals. An emblematic figure of the village intellectual whom I found in my fieldsite near Przemyśl and whom Hann also knows well was Father Stanisław Bartmiński. The Krasieczyn parish priest was known for his interest in political affairs in the whole of Poland, and his concerns about multicultural tolerance would easily fit into the definitions of civil society (Buzalka 2007: 140). Ferenc Erdei (1910–1971), the political representative of the policies of embourgeoisement in rural Hungary, who served as a communist Minister of Agriculture (1949–1953) and remained in the high echelons of power under the regime of János Kádár (1956–1988), has a special place in Hann’s analyses. The emancipatory

ideas of Erdei's work and thought were limited in pre-socialist Hungary, since "for Hungarian peasant families such as his own, it was blocked at a certain point by the dual class oppression of the Magyar gentry and aristocracy, who owned most of the land, and the Jews and German-speakers, who dominated the emerging capitalist economy of the cities" (Hann 2020: 465). As Hann stresses, "the principal opposition crystallised as a dichotomy between *népi* and *urbánus*, corresponding roughly to the countryside versus the city" (Ibid.). For narrowing the gap between the city and the country, state-socialist material embourgeoisement was particularly effective (Hann 2020: 475). Due to the crisis in the rural material economy after the collapse of state socialism, Hann argues, "the new populism is a response to renewed marginalisation under global capitalism" (Hann 2020: 479):

The extreme nature of the Hungarian case today arises from the fact that the sense of precarity and relative deprivation is greater in a country where so many households, especially in the countryside and small towns, were engaged in dynamic accumulation in the last decades of socialism. (Ibid.)

The material reasons for the rise of Hungarian populism are obviously valid beyond the Hungarian case, notably in rural Slovakia. I have nevertheless argued (Buzalka 2015; 2020; 2021)—and I argue further in this paper—for a deeper historical analysis of the autochthonous sources of populism complementary to the arguments developed by Hann. Namely, I argue for the differentiation between various kinds of populist emancipatory projects in modern East-Central Europe, historical ones, but especially those developed in reaction to the state-socialist project. In most non-anthropological accounts, populism has been treated as an obstacle to the full development of liberal *civitas*, while most anthropologists see populism in a more positive light, stressing the embedded nature and community function of populism as a shield against the effects of large-scale transformations. I am nevertheless not aware of accounts that consider populism as a potentially progressive and even a liberal force in the context of post-socialism, similar in scope and influence to the tradition known in the American Midwest or some of the interwar agrarian movements in Eastern Europe.

My perspective, therefore, stresses the genuine progressive nature of some populist movements led by the liberal intelligentsia

in Slovakia, who might be inadequately lumped into the category of market liberals. The reactionary populists, the ‘conventional’ post-socialist populists of the region, likewise represented by the elites, instead united former communist technocrats, post-socialist privatisers and nationalist intellectuals in Slovakia. I considered post-peasant populism as developing from a ‘traditional’ social structure, recalling the agrarian era on a societal scale, with large-scale transformations, such as socialism and post-socialism, contributing to the solidity of this structure, and what might be seen locally as a combination of identity narratives, collective memories and rural ideologies (Buzalka 2021: 22–23). While peasants were considered relics of an agrarian age who did not fit into the modernist discourse of socialism, at the same time, state-socialist economy and politics created large numbers of nominally modern citizens of materially advanced villages and cities who only slowly gave up their village identities and habits. I call these state-socialist people “post-peasants”, using the term I first chose to characterise the religious-national populations in south-eastern Poland (Buzalka 2007). It can be argued that state socialism was—especially in its more advanced form in the 1970s and 1980s in countries like Hungary or Czechoslovakia—a populist regime *sui generis* promoting its own ideology, suspicious of urban culture and celebrating the folkish representations of “the people”, in particular in its “actually existing” state-socialist form. The Czech sociologist Ivo Možný (1991) famously explained how families originally dispossessed of private property by communists in the 1950s in fact colonised the state in late socialism for their own benefit. In Slovakia, where the bulk of intellectuals came from the countryside, this was in contrast to the urbanised, state-socialist elites and working classes in the Czech lands as well as urban classes and societal awareness of national aristocracy in Poland and Hungary, where differentiation between the city and the country has been more intense.

In my article in the special volume dedicated to the Polanyian Double movement, initiated by Chris Hann (Buzalka 2021), I showed how countermovement emotions in the sense of Polanyi, whom Hann (2019) “repatriates” to the analyses of post socialism, can be successfully employed by reactionaries and by liberals, provided they can effectively mobilise key actors within Slovak society and mitigate the economic

ideology of the free market. My focus was on leaders at the national level. In this article I follow a similar argument, complementing the societal perspective with a more detailed look at the role of populism in local politics. As Hann (2020: 478) writes about Hungary, “whereas the *népi* [national] movement in the interwar decades was concerned with the emancipation of the rural masses, the post-peasant populists [of the post-socialist period] resort to increasingly authoritarian means to consolidate the class power of a national bourgeoisie”; the situation in Slovakia might have been analysed differently.

The Slovak Republic was proclaimed on 1 January 1993 as one of the two successor states of the newly divided Czechoslovakia. As a state, Slovakia was founded on the progressive legacy of the nation-state of Czechs and Slovaks of the interwar period (1918–1938). While the urban Czech population dominated the former common state’s industrial politics and economy, Slovak politics inherited most of its features in everyday politics from the agrarian Kingdom of Hungary. The initial exception was the narrow circles of the intelligentsia, born predominantly into Slovakia’s Lutheran minority and with close ties to intellectual circles in Prague that sided with the progressive nation-building programme of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937). The growing Slovak elite, trained in the new Slovak universities after 1918, gradually came to demand national emancipation from the interwar republic.

The alternative—the predominantly Catholic political tradition—enjoyed major electoral support in the newly independent state. Formed around the “Father of the Nation”, the Catholic priest Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938), this national-conservative tradition was opposed to progressive ideas. In 1938, Hlinka’s Slovak Peoples’ Party became the only party representative of the Slovak Republic (1939–1945), where it established a nationalist autocracy with fascist tendencies as a vassal state of Nazi Germany. The *ľudáks* (the popular name for members of the Peoples’ Party) considered the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 to be a war against the Slovaks’ own state. The democrats and communists united in the fight against fascism and declared the major goal of the uprising to be the restoration of Czechoslovakia. After the elections of 1946, the democrats, the descendants of the agrarian party of the interwar period, were joined by Catholics who had not been compromised during the period of clerical fascism, and they won significantly over



the communists. Due to the unitary nature of the state, however, Czech votes were decisive. The bold victory of the communists in the Czech lands made Czechoslovakia the only Eastern European country where the communists won in elections before introducing a dictatorship. Interpretations of the past that placed the Slovaks on the “good side” of post-war history, including the Slovak National Uprising, fell into the hands of communists. Throughout state socialism in Czechoslovakia, Slovak communists fought for a greater balance between the Czech and Slovak parts of the joint state. They finally achieved some bitter progress after the Warsaw Pact armies entered Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague spring of 1968. The period of so-called normalisation lasted until 1989, and especially in Slovakia this meant the unprecedented development of the countryside and the advance of young Slovaks into higher positions in society and the economy. Nevertheless, this period required a compromise to be accepted with the rigid one-party regime established following the purges after 1968. It is they who became known as “Husák’s children” (named after the General Secretary of the Communist Party and President Gustáv Husák, 1913–1991, an ethnic Slovak). This was the baby-boom generation that was born or came to adulthood during the normalisation period, who currently hold key positions in Slovakia.

Both reactionary and progressive forces in Slovakia after 1989 had to deal with this political legacy of a predominantly rural country. The bulk of Slovak post-peasants have been rural proletarians since the time of state socialism, as the successful collectivisation stripped Slovaks of their material independence. One can contrast this with the situation in Hungary, as presented by Hann in his book *Tázlár. A Village in Hungary* (1980). He refers to the rural households that pursued the private accumulation of consumer goods on a scale unknown elsewhere in the Soviet bloc. He argues that socialist policies and the populists in Hungary had somehow reached a compromise that was satisfactory to both sides, though he stresses that this did not mean that villagers were ever reconciled with socialist ideology. Instead, their values and world view remained populist-bourgeois. Although the rural proletarians in Slovakia lost most of their means and skills with regard to production for the market, they, too, retained an emotional and aesthetic attachment to the country. The market reformers legitimised their ideologies using this smallholders’ nostalgia, but while Hungarian country people missed the

privileges of their strata under Kádár's goulash-socialist economy, the people in Slovakia soon realised that the plots they inherited brought hardly any private revenues under the continuing dominance of the red barons in the privatised rural agricultural industry, just as they hardly used to bring any under normalisation, when the redistributive system and economic centralisation (the opposite to the Hungarian mixed economy) was feeding the country with very basic products. I present this Slovak case using my own personal story.

### Post-socialist Memories

I grew up in the southern part of the district of Krupina, one of the mediaeval and the contemporary town centres to which most of the historical Hont county of the Hungarian Kingdom belongs. The handful of villages in the southern microregion of this district have also historically gravitated towards the agrarian town of Šahy (Ipolyság in Hungarian), which was a part of the Levice district. At the time of my childhood, this Slovak-Hungarian border town was home to eight thousand people—a dwindling Hungarian-speaking majority and a growing population of Slovaks. The town was surrounded by ethnically Hungarian villages, so the bilingual competence that I lacked was highly beneficial locally. In the 1970s and 1980s the southern parts of the Hont region were among the more prosperous agricultural parts of Czechoslovakia (a smaller part of the historical county, including the town of Nagymaros, facing the mediaeval castle of Visegrád on the opposite bank of the Danube, belonged to Hungary). Large-scale cooperative farming, along with some minor industry in the towns and numerous state jobs, provided employment for the local population. From 1969, Slovakia was a part of the so-called Czechoslovak Federation that comprised the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Slovakia was a subunit of the federation, a political appendix to the unitary state with limited autonomy. The areas of southern Slovakia were therefore marginal to the centres of power both within Slovakia as well as Czechoslovakia, as were the members of the Hungarian minority who inhabited the villages located to the south of mine. The Krupina subdistrict, to which my village Hontianske Moravce belonged, was subordinated to a larger district with its seat in the city of Zvolen, located fifty kilometres north of the village. Moravce was an ethnically Slovak village with a slowly shrinking Lutheran majority

that was desperate to attract immigrants for its large, consolidated cooperative. The newcomers were very often poor, rural Catholics from the upper parts of the country. New socialist housing blocks were erected during my childhood to provide housing for this new population of rural proletarians, which was hesitantly but unavoidably accepted by the locals for the reason of basic prospects of growth, since the ageing locals had produced only a handful of offspring, who were themselves upwardly mobile and moving away to the urban centres. The late socialist period was therefore prosperous for my fellow villagers in an ambivalent way, as prosperity was weighed against the inflow of a new population considered as having a lower status and to whom the locals had been giving favour.

The change in power relations was visible during the perestroika period in the appointment of a new head of the cooperative—a communist of Catholic upbringing—who had immigrated from the populous village of Očová in central Slovakia, but who originally came from a region further to the north, considered historically very poor by the self-confident local post-peasants. The new head replaced the native heads of peasant descent who had been serving the cooperative for generations, since the hesitant introduction of collectivisation into the prosperous market-oriented village agriculture. The new mayor, the second major political figure in the village, was put into the office by the very late communist power holders. Although he was a newcomer to the village, he later won the first free election after 1989 and has remained in office ever since. I first noticed the existence of communist Czechoslovakia in the village daycare when my teacher, a young communist, complained to the authorities about being corrected by my father when she addressed him. He objected to being referred to as “comrade pastor” (*súдруh farár*). In elementary school I recall the desire to be a pioneer, a member of the communist youth organisation. The photos of President Gustáv Husák, the controversial symbol of the normalisation period that followed the suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968 by the Warsaw Pact armies, hung on the wall. I recall the communist coat of arms, which showed the Czech lion with flames on its chest as well as three hills, the communist-era symbol of Slovakia that replaced the older double cross associated with upper parts of the Hungarian Kingdom, which had been adopted for the Czechoslovak coat of arms in the interwar period. I also remember the exercises

with gas masks and fake grenades and the long collective walks in nature that were supposed to prepare us for resilience in the case of a capitalist invasion. A cellar door in the former feudal mansion that had been altered to serve as the socialist healthcare centre was supposed to provide us with entry to a kind of military bunker, but it was always locked.

In 1988 the communist regime allowed the anniversary of the interwar Czechoslovakia to be commemorated (28 October was also a commemoration of the Czechoslovak Federation of 1960 and the day of nationalisation of 1945, which aimed to eliminate the “bourgeois” legacy of 28 October). This celebration indicated the continuing legacy of the First Republic, i.e. Czechoslovakia from 1918–1938, that the communist regime wished to suppress. The founders of the democratic republic also received more attention. These included Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880–1919), whose tomb on the hill of Bradlo in western Slovakia was a pilgrimage site for thousands of families, including my own, and a sign of symbolic resistance against the regime. It seemed from the official ideology that Štefánik, the village-born son of a Lutheran pastor, a Paris based astronomer and a general in the French Army, almost did not exist for the socialist state. My grandfather, born in 1910, was a strong supporter of Czechoslovak democracy. He and his brother had experienced a hard childhood with their widowed peasant mother, until my grandfather received a proper parish in south-central Slovakia and married my grandmother, the daughter of a local teacher. My grandfather graduated in theology in Bratislava and managed to receive a so-called Masaryk stipend in order to study in Strasbourg. His activities behind the front lines led him to support the Slovak National Uprising undercover, aiming to serve for the restoration of Czechoslovakia. His rectory in the village of Stredné Plachtince, south-central Slovakia, was an important centre of political discussions. And his parish house continued to serve this purpose in his new workplace, too, as he was forced by the communist authorities to leave his parishioners for the village of Dunajská Lužná, near Bratislava, to which the people from Štefánik’s native region under the hill of Bradlo—the strong guardians of the interwar Czechoslovak legacy—were resettled to replace the local Germans who were forced to leave as a consequence of the post-war peace agreements. My father (born in 1944) was a theology student

when he took an active part in the 1968 demonstrations against the Soviet tanks. He met my mother, a student of economics, in one of the churches in Bratislava while he was practising his sermons.

My younger brother and I became children of normalisation; we belonged to a particularly strong cohort of youth born under the improving welfare conditions of late socialist Czechoslovakia based on the tacit agreement between the people and the authorities that if no civil protests were organised in the sense of a Prague Spring scenario—if people take refuge in the private sphere of their houses and gardens—then the regime would provide them with more welfare and consumer goods. I was born in Partizánske, my father's first rectory, in a city originally founded and built by the shoe factory industrialist, democrat and philanthropist of the interwar period, Tomáš Baťa, and originally named after him as Baťovany. The city is considered the only ideal industrial town in Slovakia, planned and built with a deep interest in workers' needs, thus representing an earlier, alternative industrialisation of an agrarian country under Czechoslovakia without the need for forced, disruptive, heavy industrialisation by the communists. I spent a lot of free time especially with my maternal grandmother, a pious peasant woman of central Slovakia who shared her stories about Czechoslovakia, World War II (including her fear of hungry Red Army soldiers) and especially the torturous collectivisation. She remembered voting for the Agrarian Party, which was preferred by Lutheran peasants in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia, before the war. The Agrarian Party benefited from its coalition potential and usually opposed the policies of the reactionary Slovak Peoples' Party, which became the only recognised party in fascist Slovakia (1939–1945). The legacy of interwar Czechoslovakia was more vivid among the Slovak Protestant minority than among members of the Catholic majority. Biblical Czech served as a liturgical language for Slovak Lutherans since the Reformation, and the religious "democracy" among Protestants was often compared to the foundational myth of the Masaryk project. Masaryk had skilfully incorporated the anti-Catholic tradition from the Hussites, through Comenius's Protestant legacy, and the anti-aristocratic sentiments of the Lutherans, victims of Habsburg re-Catholicisation.

And the story of Slovak national awakeners, who were predominantly Protestant pastors and teachers, appealed directly to

the peasant masses. This dominance of the rural intelligentsia not only set the tone for democratic mobilisation in Slovakia, with the central role of the rural intelligentsia, but also reproduced the confessional cleavage. The over-representation of Lutherans was also mirrored in the structures of the elites in the Czechoslovak Republic and contrasted to the Roman Catholic majority, whose church was part of the crown of Saint Stephen of pre-1918 Hungary. The resonances of confessional cleavage into Catholics and Protestants were still present in the Slovak National Uprising against the "Catholic" state and even survived state socialism, a system that was considered to be a communist-Lutheran *coup d'état* by many proponents of the Catholic tradition. The village of Hontianske Moravce, to which my father was invited as a pastor in 1978, was conservative in terms of values and habits, despite its having undergone deep collectivisation and infrastructural modernisation. My father to this day has very positive memories of his almost twenty years of service in the parish under state socialism. As his parishioners used to say, "if we live well, we want our priest to live well too!" The combination of cooperative or wage work in Šahy or Krupina and the work on one's own plot of land enabled the abundant consumption by locals, exceeding the regular availability of agricultural products to the urban population. Considering the frequency of goulash parties, the number of schnitzel per capita and the amount of wine consumed, late socialism is still remembered as a truly joyful period by the villagers, despite the actual situation not, in fact, being particularly bright.

After the tragedy in Chernobyl in 1986, my brother and I were forbidden by our parents to play outside. We were also not allowed to pick strawberries in the rectory garden. The problem for us was not that we were instructed not to speak about the catastrophe we had learned about from the "alien" Radio Free Europe ahead of the official announcement by the communist media; the major problem was how to tell our friends, the victims of communist authorities refusing to inform them about the danger, that we cannot go cycling with them despite the late spring sun being so high. The major compulsory events of my childhood were the May Day parades held in the district town of Krupina, which the pupils of the local school were driven to by the cooperative bus. The event meant quite serious partying for the villagers, especially after the official programme had ended. All of us wished to carry the Czechoslovak flag in the parade. The red Soviet flags were

far less popular, and only our Roma classmates liked to carry them. Holding the flag helped the Roma feel that they belonged to the crowd, as they were usually segregated from us, the village boys. Despite significant improvements, the assimilation policies of the communist state underwent a significant crisis in the 1970s and 1980s (Scheffel and Mušinka 2019), which paved the way for further segregation after 1989, although nowadays virtually all the blame for Roma segregation is placed on the market transformation. My childhood idyll under late socialism was only interrupted by the investigation of my father by the secret police, based on several false accusations by his handful of local critics. Despite the curse of these openly atheist “parishioners”, we were very lucky for the support of others who appealed to the authorities to defend their pastor. My father often worried about my career prospects due to our family’s record, and he was positively surprised that I was accepted at the grammar school (*gymnázium*), which was considered an important prerequisite for university studies at that time. He nevertheless never dreamt of the humanities or social sciences, prominent subjects of propaganda, that I preferred, and he hoped at most for the ideology-free natural sciences, if I were allowed to enter the university at all, a genuine concern given our family’s political unreliability.

I entered grammar school in September 1989 in Šahy. I was one of six students out of thirty-six who did not speak a word of Hungarian. My father perhaps thought that I would have a chance to learn Hungarian, a language his mother spoke well but that he was deprived of learning in his youth due to the unfavourable conditions for bilingualism under the nationalising communist post-war Slovakia (yet another argument against the responsibility for nationalism falling to post-socialist conditions). We had teachers who had moved to the town for the living quarters offered by the state, and I remember them all representing the first generation of intelligentsia growing up in villages. The mild climate and the vicinity of Budapest, eighty kilometres away and the capital of late socialist consumption, also played a role in attracting them. Throughout our studies—and earlier, while I was attending the music school in town—the Hungary across the border served as a symbol of the good life for people in normalisation Czechoslovakia, despite the long queues at the international border crossing. For us at the *gymnázium*, the Velvet Revolution took place suddenly. The teachers and especially the director, a wise Communist Party member, supported

the change. We were allowed to attend the general strike of 27 November organised by the town's workers. The situation in Prague was high on the radar by that time and the visits of revolutionary leaders from Bratislava were welcomed. The young leaders brought information and hope, as had Hungarian television for those who spoke Hungarian. This optimistic period was quickly replaced by the gloomier prospects of economic reality. The economic transformation was accompanied by the new reactionary project of an independent Slovakia, in which former communists heavily invested. I particularly recall the visits of nationalist artists who travelled across the country provoking the representatives of the Hungarian minority, who were also experiencing the revival of their ethnic difference, not least thanks to the support from *anyaország* ("the mother country"). I remember in particular the figure of actress Eva Kristínová (1928–2020), the daughter of an officer who had suffered in fascist and communist jails, promoting Slovak independence. She saw no problem in putting her name next to the prominent figures of communist art, the new nationalists. At an event in the theatre hall she heavily criticised President Havel, the conscious follower of Masaryk's legacy. Obviously, she had not forgotten the myth of a thousand years of forced Magyarisation of the Slovaks.

The inhabitants of Štúrovo, a Hungarian-speaking town on the Danube some forty kilometres away that had been renamed after the leader of Slovak nineteenth-century nationalists with no ties to the town, wanted to return to the older name, Párkány. The actress argued that the city had an even more original Slavic name to which the current Hungarian-speaking inhabitants should return if they were dishonoured by the name of Štúr. The trick of her suggestion was that the old Slavic name of the fishermen's settlement was *Kokot*, a vulgar term used for *penis* in contemporary Slovak. The last day of December 1992, the day Czechoslovakia ceased to exist, I was at home. I think my parents were already in bed, because my father had a service to deliver the next morning. At a time when the television played only the Slovak part of the former common anthem there was silence in the village. I recall that the first positive patriotic blast came only ten years later, as a consequence of the Slovak ice hockey team's victory at the world championships in Goteborg.

By the time of my university studies in Bratislava in 1994–1999, my father had moved to another village. Since he had buried most



of the dozens of parishioners who had thrown him a big welcoming party in the parish house garden in 1978, the demographic decline of Hontianske Moravce contributed very much to his decision. Some fifteen or so years after we left, I built a wine cellar in the neighbouring spa town that allowed me to reconnect with some of my old friends. The good life of the late socialist period and the hardships of post-socialist years were gone; the local situation had solidly improved as a consequence of Slovakia's entry into the European Union in 2004. The drive to the capital nowadays takes one hour and forty minutes thanks to the highway, which contrasts sharply with four or more hours under communism, when travel for more distant work was obviously far less pleasant. Of course, local services, public transport and regional job opportunities greatly declined after 1989 but who should have been serving, if demographics took the upper hand even before the introduction of the market? As my personal story shows, late socialism and post-socialism brought about ambivalent results when it comes to development. As I show in the following section, it would have sufficed to contrast these periods without considering the long-term effects of the historical legacies of the agrarian period that led to the post-peasant present via crucial communist transformation. Both structurally, when it comes to the role of rural intelligentsia, and symbolically, when it comes to the value of rural life, mobilisation can develop in two ways under transformation—towards greater reception of reactionarism as well as progressivism.

### Post-socialist Progressivism

The previous sections referred to representatives of the old rural intelligentsia—especially priests and teachers—who on the one hand were the primary agents of popular emancipation and the introduction of reforms to the village and, on the other hand, of romantic nationalism as a part of reactionary populism. In order to illustrate this double role of the Slovak village intelligentsia, I provide below some personalities who might show the importance of my rural region for the progressive legacy of Slovakia. The cosmopolitan flavour comes from the life stories of people such as Ferdinand Daučík (1910–1986), the manager of several Spanish football clubs. A famous player in the Czechoslovak league and later the coach of the national team, he was born and grew up in

Šahy. After spending two years in communist prisons, he emigrated to Spain to become the coach of FC Barcelona. Another example is Juraj (Gyögy) Berczeller (1914–2008), in emigration known as George Best, who was a person responsible for the development of Slovak popular entertainment. He was a medical doctor, a piano tuner, a composer, a pianist-entertainer of operetta, jazz and light medley genre, who passed away in Australia. For ten years, from 1958 on, he was the resident pianist at the Tatra Revue Theatre in Bratislava, the key institution on the vibrant cultural scene of pre-1968 Bratislava.

The regional progressive tradition can be more appropriately demonstrated with the story of Ladislav Ballek (1941–2014), a leading and for many experts the best novelist of the second half of twentieth-century Slovak literature. His works were inspired by his youth in the region, in particular in Šahy and his native village of Terany, where his father served as a custom officer during the World War II period. Ballek enjoyed the image of a leftist progressive intellectual who in his positions of politician and diplomat supported the transition of the Communist Party into the democratic party emerging in the post-1989 period. His novels take inspiration from the agrarian town; they well illustrate the inter-ethnic relations and offer a critique of agrarian inequality, thus making his work truly progressive. The musician, composer, humourist, dramaturge, actor, columnist and promoter of the Internet in Slovakia, Jaroslav Filip (1949–2000), who had an extraordinary range of activities, was born and grew up in my own childhood village of Hontianske Moravce. He was one of the most prolific representatives of Bratislava café culture of the 1990s. His father, whom I had the chance to meet personally, was a teacher and director of the village school. Jaroslav Filip can be considered the court composer of the doyens of Slovak (urban) humour, Milan Lasica (1940–2021) and Július Satinský (1941–2002), who challenged in particular the boorishness and folklorist kitsch of Slovak patriots in their work. Their truly liberating and progressive humour and the songs composed by Filip based on their texts were distributed in a semi-legal form even among my friends in the village while the authors were banned from a full public appearance as a consequence of post-1968 normalisation. These figures can hardly be considered peasants, but their origins in agrarian regions and very often in peasant families, too, show how elites were recruited in Slovakia and how important the village was even for progressive projects. While the

Polish intelligentsia—both progressive and reactionary—comes from the large cities and its position is closely allied with the aristocracy, and while Budapest has always been a cradle of liberal cosmopolitanism differing sharply from the rest of Hungary, and while the Czechs, proletarians, entrepreneurs and intellectuals were all fairly urbanised back in the nineteenth century, the Slovak elites—both progressive and reactionary—originate in the village.

All the major political leaders of modern Slovakia were village-born, including the communist president of Czechoslovakia and one of the leaders of the Slovak National Uprising (1944) Gustáv Husák (1913–1991) and the popular leader of the Prague Spring Alexander Dubček (1921–1992). The “father of the nation”, the Catholic priest and leader of the Slovak Peoples’ Party Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938), and his follower Jozef Tiso (1887–1947), the president of the Slovak Republic under Nazi tutelage, who was hanged as a war criminal, grew up in a small town and village setting, respectively. The true village progressive of the interwar period was the Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia, Milan Hodža (1878–1944), the author of the *Federation in Central Europe* (1944), proposing the federation of Central European states united against the growing dangers of Germany and Russia, not least on the basis of their agrarian economies and cultures. In short, no member of the elite who claimed Slovak origin came from the ranks of the aristocracy, landowning or capitalist classes. The two contemporary intellectuals who might be representative of “café culture”—Ballek and Filip—were the creators and promoters of the progressive tradition, actively siding with the liberal-democratic camp against the nationalist reactionary of Vladimír Mečiar, the autocratic Prime Minister of Slovakia in 1990–1991 and 1994–1998, who is also a genuine Slovak villager by origin. It is true that villages like Hontianske Moravce managed to benefit from populist rule, and the countryside generally voted overwhelmingly for populists, but this support was not always for the benefit of the local people.

The head of the cooperative (and a member of parliament by the mid-1990s) and the mayor, both former communists, arranged state support for their cooperative as well as subsidies for village public projects using their ties to the populist party of Vladimír Mečiar in power. One of these projects was the resettlement of dozens of families from Ukraine who claimed Slovak origin. The two new blocks of flats were erected in the 1990s to offer immigrants housing, but the newcomers

only slowly accommodated to the local customs. The only changes in the still demographically declining village now are a tiny Orthodox church, the communist House of Culture that was turned into a Roman Catholic prayer house, and the large Lutheran church which is ever emptier. The once flourishing private vineyards have been left to become overgrown by weeds; the old cooperative buildings are half-destroyed (the cooperative privatisers are only producing large-scale produce requiring fewer local jobs), and there are more and more houses for sale, despite the renovated mansion where I used to visit the dentist, new pavements along the district road, and the new highway some forty kilometres away that allows locals to commute faster for work to the big cities of Nitra and Bratislava, all built thanks to European Union subsidies. All of these developments remind of the progressive as well as reactionary potential of the rural social basis after 1989. This political significance of the conflict—that Hann in the case of Hungary locates as the conflict between pro-market liberal elites and reactionary, socially sensitive national populists—dominated over the market transformation. Liberal intellectuals I used to meet with were not blind supporters of the market's invisible hand. All of my teachers and intellectual friends—for example, literary historian Rudolf Chmel, who was the last Czechoslovak ambassador to Budapest, the Minister of Culture and later Vice-Prime Minister and served as the president of the Open Society Foundation in Slovakia, to mention the most prominent among them—came from a village or small-town setting. The most influential intellectual monthly *OS (Občianska spoločnosť—“civil society”)*, established in 1997, aimed to oppose growing populist reactionary activities but at the same time to balance the ideological language of the economic reformers by discussing a fair and just society, democracy and human rights, which were not an invention of cosmopolitan elites but were newly questioned by the populist regime of the time (for more information about this period, see Buzalka 2019).

Although rural transformation was not a hot issue in these liberal circles, unfortunately, the rural origin of Slovak reactionism, to which the regime of that time subscribed, was heavily discussed by liberals as the major obstacle to development. The bulk of my student friends sided with the anti-Mečiar camp. Before the 1998 election that brought about a victory of a wide progressive coalition over reactionary populism, we participated in strikes against the attempts of the government to restrict

university freedoms. My colleagues and I volunteered to observe the fairness of elections in our native villages in a situation where the ruling parties dominated the media, used sheer propaganda, and suppressed opposition, all signalling possible election fraud. More important for my generation was the deep international isolation that our country felt under the autocratic rule that sharply contrasted with the advancement of European integration in the neighbouring countries. Our weekend student trips to Prague were about enjoying the atmosphere of a European metropolis that our populist-dominated regime was lacking at that time. There were queues for visas to the United Kingdom in Bratislava but even “window shopping” to neighbouring Austria, which was very expensive for the average Slovak of that time, became complicated, as travellers faced more restrictions. Obviously, it would be a mistake to ignore the progressive tradition that existed well beyond the circles of the intelligentsia. I recorded several interviews with workers in Košice, eastern Slovakia, during my fieldwork in 2009 and 2010 (see, for example, Buzalka and Ferencová 2017). One retired steelworker in Košice explained to me the meaning of post-1989:

I can buy the shoes I want and go to the mountains I prefer. That is freedom. It's not the hiking shoes or whatever one can buy now that wasn't available back then, but the opportunity to choose what one wanted to do with these purchases. It didn't work like this back then.

In the summer of 2019 I recorded the following discussion between two friends from south-central Slovakia. Zdenko (aged fifty-six), a bus driver, shared the opinion that the “communists robbed everybody of everything. Freedom, factories, craft services, and in 1953 all the money [the forced currency exchange was highly disadvantageous for ordinary savers].” Braňo (aged sixty-seven), a former truck driver, replied:

The democrats stole everything that the communists left! The democrats sold us those flats that the communists gave us for free, along with the cooperatives, factories and so on, and they put the money in their private pockets. This is how they crushed the Slovak pride, the dignity of citizens, and then gave up our state sovereignty in favour of the European Union. How can I not side with the Communist Party when these crooks [the democrats] managed to fuck up everything?

Zdenko replied that privatised socialist flats were sold very advantageously by those who originally obtained them for a nominal

price. And Braňo, himself the owner of a flat in a socialist block, which the villager Zdenko never possessed, continued:

I just wanted to say that the housing problem was solved by the communists and that these flats were built in such a way that citizens could purchase them for a modest price. Now they are selling them for extraordinary prices. But housing is not a problem any longer thanks to the communists!

The value of socialist-era flats has increased enormously and those, especially from the country, who never received a socialist flat—such as Zdenko—felt the injustice of the argument generally held by followers of “communist nostalgia”, such as Braňo. In contrast, many villagers suffered a serious loss in value of their spacious village properties built with official and unofficial socialist subsidies and the help of neighbours. Even when he got a decent job, Zdenko—like other villagers—found it impossible to buy a flat in the capital. Braňo, on the other hand, could not forget the privileges that people enjoyed simply by living in the countryside, combining domestic food production with relatively well-paid work in a factory. While Zdenko accepts the post-socialist reality, commutes to the capital and stays in a workers’ hotel, going back to his house at the weekend just to cut the grass in his abandoned vegetable garden, Braňo, who has an adequate local job and whose property in the district capital has increased in value severalfold, criticises “the system” for destroying well-functioning communist housing policies. The voting preference of the two friends is also a matter of curiosity. While Braňo voted for the reactionaries, Zdenko has been a staunch supporter of moderate centrist politics since 1989. At first sight, the only difference is their family origin. Zdenko is the grandson of a small peasant and the son of socialist cooperative workers who remained moderately privileged in the socialist village. Braňo is the grandson of landless rural proletarians, whose numbers were high, especially on pre-socialist land estates of what is now southern Slovakia, and whose parents obtained flats in cooperative housing blocks built in the 1970s. The division into moderate centre-right progressive politics and reactionary post-communist nostalgia therefore does not neatly follow the cleavage into elites and the people, urbanites versus rural inhabitants in Slovakia, and it may not even fit the material inequalities or ways of life. As this essay argues, we should look at complementary expressions of progressive

and reactionary politics across these divisions, as influenced by rural intellectuals. László Fosztó (this volume; see also Scheffel 2015 for eastern Slovakia) showed that ethnic tolerance and division in Romania has always been locally embedded, anchoring the local socioeconomic exchanges, and the eventual xenophobia coming from the nation-state politics might be efficiently calmed by the local relations and practices. To translate these efficient integrations back into national politics and policies is a role for intellectuals, especially if they originate or remain an inseparable part of local communities.

### Liberal Ruralism

There was an urban movement of intellectuals in late socialist Slovakia who in the best tradition of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia assisted in “civilising” the villages. In the very late period of state socialism this movement emerged as expressions of environmental democracy and sustainability in the conditions of the devastating effects of heavy industrialisation that the communist regime was widely ignoring. The authors Petr Jehlička, Phillip Sarre and Juraj Podoba (2005) explicitly speak of a movement in Czechoslovakia, based principally on the assumptions of “liberal environmentalism”. Mikuláš Huba, a geology professor, a former member of parliament and one of the leaders of the movement, characterised it as the articulation “of the vision for a new, democratic, more cultured and more ecological, healthier and prettier Slovakia”. Eugen Gidl (1944–2021), a journalist, screenwriter and editor who was silenced during the normalisation period and after 1989 operated both in ‘Public Against Violence’, the major movement in Slovakia in 1989, and later, as an independent journalist, activist and one of the editors of the influential liberal 1990s journal *OS*—promoted positions that can be characterised as “left-liberal” and critical of the market transformation. The foundations of these critiques of bureaucratic centralism, which led to critiques of a similarly impersonal post-socialist market, lay in the period of late socialism around the publication of *Bratislava Nahlas* (Bratislava Aloud), published in 1987 as a sixty-page report covering problems ranging from environmental protection, quality of air, and disadvantageous Roma. This expert report, to which more than eighty authors from so-called grey zone—neither dissidents

connected, for example, with Charter 77, nor fully loyal members of the communist state establishment—contributed, became the subject of important public discussion and a civic movement, along with the Catholic laity movement, exemplified by the “candle demonstration” for religious and civic freedoms on 28 March 1988, which was violently suppressed by the regime. Economic liberalism played no role in any of those autochthonous and influential Slovak political movements of late state socialism. As Gindl wrote twenty years after, the members of the environmental movement were

[...] united by the green, and by that time ideological, ecological ethos, intimate relations with nature, and with material values of the past. They were looking for a room in which they could heal their attacked civic dignity, the major component of civic self-confidence [...] They managed to connect urban oversensitivity with the sensitivity of people with natural green empathy, the temporary country people [...] The break-outs of members to the countryside in search of folk blockhouses and hay-barns were not only escapes from the hostile reality [...] but they also cultivated a graceful egoism of self-renewal, able to bring a new vision of the world [...] Sociologists therefore called them positive deviants [...]

Not only Gindl, born in the town of Liptovský Mikuláš under the Tatra Mountains, but most other authors of the *Bratislava Aloud* manifesto, represented the solid political opposition at the time of the Velvet Revolution and several years since then. As Juraj Podoba (1998), himself a co-author of the report, argues, the green element played such a prominent role in the 1989 revolution that in Slovakia it could have been called the “green velvet revolution”. One of the most visible symbols of the movement is the person of Ján Budaj, the leader of the November 1989 demonstrations, who since March 2021 has served as the Minister of Environment in the government of Igor Matovič and, since March 2021, in the government of Eduard Heger. As Juraj Podoba further refers to the period of nationalist politics in Slovakia of the 1990s, the marginalisation of environmental issues and the low profile of environmental policies in Slovakia was in sharp contrast with the high environmental concern and dynamic development of environmental institutions and laws in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Podoba, using two case studies—the aluminium smelter in Žiar nad Hronom and the waterworks Gabčíkovo on the Danube—illustrates the changing attitudes of Slovak society regarding environmental issues



during the post-socialist transition. He explains how environmentally harmful and previously unpopular symbols of the communist achievements against which the ecology-friendly resistance of the 1980s was targeted have been politically appropriated by populist reactionaries into symbols of achievement of the Slovak nation and independent Slovakia. To criticise these symbols as damaging the environment in the 1990s meant to criticise the Slovak nation. The victory of reactionary populism after the parliamentary elections of 1994, which brought the most illiberal post-1989 government of Vladimír Mečiar to power, was not fully caused by a defensive reaction of frustrated populations losing under market transformation. The reason that the Slovakia of 1990 differed in the intensity of reactionary politics vis-à-vis its Visegrad neighbours equally resulted from the underrepresentation of existing liberal forces in parliament due to their lack of strategic cooperation, not necessarily their lack of public support. As the political scientist Soňa Szomolányi (2019) argues, Slovakia's post-socialist development shows no strong evidence of path dependency on patterns of an essentially rural country, modernised according to the Soviet model. The decisive actors of November 1989 became liberal intellectuals, and they represented only a small minority. Despite having only minimal material and organisational resources, they showed what Szomolányi calls "value preparedness" (*hodnotovú pripravenosť*). The parliamentary form of government and the proportional electoral system were set up by liberal reformers and, unlike in neighbouring Poland and Hungary, these institutions represented a kind of insurance policy against authoritarian tendencies. As Szomolányi argues, the negotiated elite transition of Hungary and Poland might nowadays contradict the thesis of the most successful passage to democracy. Szomolányi's hypothesis is that it is citizens' participation in the process of political transformation—such as in November 1989, during the popular protests against the autocratic rule of Vladimír Mečiar in 1998 and for a decent Slovakia in 2018, following the killing of the journalist Ján Kuciak and consequent fall of the Prime Minister Róbert Fico—that plays the important role. Even in the case of the Solidarity movement in Poland, according to Szomolányi, the masses were not directly involved in the democratic settlement agreed between the communist and opposition elites, and the transition was only completed by the new non-communist constitution in 1997 (see Szomolányi 1999).

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was led by liberal-minded intellectuals from the “grey zone”—i.e. not from among the communist dissidents like in the Czech lands—but critical professionals and intellectuals from established institutions, supported by members of the environmental movement and the dissident Catholic laity. Having a clear programme of democratic reforms, the members of this revolutionary generation had no solid plan for economic reform. On the contrary, post-communist and nationalist circles soon formed an alliance under the charismatic leadership of Vladimír Mečiar and gradually began to demand independence. The elections of 1994 allowed the autocratic Mečiar to form a government with a nationalist party and a small left-populist party. Mečiar’s government successfully played with the legacy of the Slovak Republic from the World War II period, as well as with nostalgia for state socialism. This was the period of “wild privatisation”, the aim of which was to create a “Slovak capitalist class”. This goal was partly achieved through the state incurring an enormous level of debt. Popular political dissatisfaction nevertheless grew, and the elections of 1998 brought to power a genuine reform government which aimed to stabilise the economy and to catch up with Slovakia’s neighbours through accession to the EU on 1 May 2004. Whether this makes Slovakia exceptional in a regional comparison is yet another question—the continual balance of reactionism and populism in 2021, if compared to the more reactionary regimes of Hungary under Viktor Orbán or Poland under Jarosław Kaczyński, favour the slight exception of the former Czechoslovakia. The argument in this paper nevertheless is that we need not lump all post-socialist populism together as representing reactionary politics. The progressive critiques of market liberalism—as I have shown above—also have indigenous origins.

## Conclusion

This essay has offered a rather personal account of the role of populism in the development of post-socialist Slovakia. My goal was to engage with the productive ideas of Professor Chris Hann from the distance of almost twenty years since I wrote my doctoral thesis under his thorough supervision, for which I am enormously indebted. My major complementary account of his explanation of the rise of populism in Hungary was that we need to pay equal attention to the

values represented in what I call the post-peasant progressivism—a kind of autochthonous liberalism—as an important component of social and political emancipation, complementing reactionary post-peasant populism. I argued that progressive elements have often been overlooked by analyses of post-socialist populism. Therefore, this humble critique represents a sort of academic maturing thanks to Hann’s sharp, original and highly efficient intellectual stimulation. In summary, my perspective does not question Chris Hann’s insistence on the importance of rural embourgeoisement during state socialism. This is only to complement his perspective on material economy with an account about post-peasant values mobilisation in Slovakia, which also remains deeply petty bourgeois but certainly does not need to be successfully mobilised by the narrow reactionary ideologies of populists like Vladimír Mečiar or Viktor Orbán only. With an ethnographic approach, we can show how the post-socialist countryside, with its populist roots, can also reveal progressive tendencies.

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