

Interview with Ing. Vladimír Novák, Director General of the Directorate of Water Policy of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic

This year, the Slovak Republic is chairing the largest commission focused on the protection of watercourses, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). Therefore, we interviewed its president for the Year 2024, Ing. Vladimír Novák, who is also the General Director of the Directorate of Water Policy at the Slovak Ministry of Environment.

Mr. Novák, you studied hydraulic engineering at the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava. What drew you to the field of water management?

In simple terms, a family tradition. After graduation, my father joined the then Slovak Water Management State Enterprise; it was at the time of the devastating flood on the Danube in 1965 (June 12th 1965), when the Danube dam in Patince broke on 15th June, the dam between Číčov and Klúčovec on 17th June, and near Kollárovo on 25th June. During the flood, 60,000 inhabitants and 100,000 cattle were evacuated, 3,910 houses were destroyed, another 6,180 houses were damaged, and all water resources on Žitný ostrov were contaminated.

This event boosted the society awareness of the necessary comprehensive management of the area along the Danube, not only from the flood protection point of view, but also ensuring the required parameters of the Danube waterway as an inland waterway of international importance on one of its most critical sections, Rajka–Gönyű, and ensuring the use of the Danube's hydropower potential; and all this with regard to the protection of water resources and ecosystems of the Danube delta.

My father gradually worked his way into positions from which he determined the manner and style in which the laying out of the waterway, including the supply and outlet canal, was carried out for many years, as well as the lock chambers of the Gabčíkovo stage of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros waterworks; and, at the end of his working career, he put his experience to good use as head of the Department of Waterways and Navigation Safety at the State Navigation Administration (today's Transport Authority).

Basically, during my entire childhood, as well as a university student, I had the opportunity to sail with my father on the Čajka and Gabčíkovo stake vessels as well as on the Tekov and Hont push boats, and also participate in activities related to the creation of maps for staking the shipping channel, cooperation in the creation of studies of the Vážská waterway and, last but not least, in passporting and processing navigation studies of the Zemplín waterway. By that time, I had already studied at the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava.

Moreover, my grandfather spent most of his working life on the Danube as a technician on various vessels, especially the group of ships consisting of excavator Kriváň and elevator Radhošť. An interesting fact: during an air raid by the American Air Force, when 158 B-24 Liberator bombers of the 15th Air Force attacked the Apollo refinery in Bratislava on 16th June 1944, the Kriváň – Radhošť complex was damaged. After the repair, it continued to serve until the excavator Kriváň sank in the 1970s, while two members of the crew unfortunately did not manage to save themselves.

All the things I mentioned determined and established the direction of my studies to a large extent, but also shaped and laid the foundation of my professional focus.

Where did your path lead you after graduating from the Faculty of Civil Engineering?

After completing my studies in 1997, I continued as a doctoral student at the Department of Hydraulic Engineering of the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava until September 2000. Subsequently, I was employed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic at the Water Section, Department of Watercourse Management. My job was mainly the agenda of bilateral cooperation on border waters with neighbouring states, the agenda connected with the character and course of the state border on border waters, as well as the agenda of the development of inland waterways and navigation. I gradually acquired experience related to the creation of strategic, planning and conceptual materials, as well as legislative proposals not only from the above-mentioned area of competence, but also from other areas, which included, for example, the development of public water supply systems and public sewers, the protection of valuable water resources and last but not least technical and safety supervision of water structures and flood protection.

With a break, you have worked in various managerial positions within the Ministry of Agriculture, or Ministry of Environment, for almost twenty years. What was the reason for leaving the positions in which you established yourself so significantly, and what did this change bring you?

The reason was a change in the leadership of the Ministry in 2020, which I think had different ideas about priorities in the area of sustainable water use and water resource protection, although I never learned the specific reasons and did not search for them. I took it as a fact that every management chooses an expert they trust for positions, which, as it turns out, also includes the position of Director General of the Directorate of Water Policy.

Since I devoted years of study and practice to water management, I did not leave the department bitter; on the contrary, I took advantage of the opportunity to continue working in the Directorate of Water Policy in the position of clerk, or the chief state adviser, often within the agenda of bilateral cooperation on border waters with neighbouring states, as well as the agenda associated with the development of inland waterways and navigation and, last but not least, the agenda related to the methodical guidance, management, and check of state-owned enterprises founded by the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic.

In addition, from the position as chairman of the Slovak Navigation Congress (Slovenský plavebný kongres), I ensured cooperation with the Czech Navigation and Waterways Association, (České plavební a vodocestní sdružení, z. s.), which culminated in the preparation and holding of a regular conference with international participation – 31st Navigation Days (Plavebné dni) 2023.



Bojan Vranjković (Serbian ICPDR President for 2023) and Vladimír Novák (Slovak ICPDR President for 2024) during the handing over and taking over of the ICPDR presidency at the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Vienna in January 2024

In addition to the negatives, the change also brought me some positives, such as more time for myself and my family. For example, in a year and a half, I managed to reduce my weight from 113 kg to 89 kg, which at that time ultimately brought me an improvement in my health and especially my fitness.

You worked in the position of Director General of the Directorate of Water Policy of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic before. Were you able to follow up on your previous work?

In essence, I followed up on my previous activities, as the priorities and goals of water management remain unchanged in principle and are set for six-year planning cycles; however, it is possible to discuss the prioritization of individual measures, considering available financial resources and human resources for their implementation.

However, at the time of the inevitable consolidation of funds, it seems necessary to correctly set the just-mentioned prioritization of implementing the individual measures and also to motivate the team, which, compared to the times of the previous government, was reduced by six employees. When we realize the content and scope of the tasks of water management and protection of water resources in the Slovak Republic, 26 employees in reality and 28 officially may appear to be sufficient; however, we must remember that we are not only talking about ensuring activities under the responsibility of the central body of the state administration in the field of water, but also management, methodical guidance, and check of ministry institutes of the Slovak Hydrometeorological Institute, Slovak Water Research Institute, but also departmental state enterprises, such as Slovenský vodohospodársky podnik, š. p., and Vodohospodárska výstavba, š. p.

Last but not least, we are “dependent” on cooperation with other ministries; in particular, the Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic in matters of development and modernization of waterways and inland navigation, the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic in matters of water energy use as a renewable source from hydro power stations, including small ones up to 10 MW, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic in matters of hydromelioration, the Ministry of Health in matters of public health, water suitable for bathing, and also the Ministry of the Interior in matters of flood protection and crisis management, as well as in matters of character and the course of the state border on watercourses etc.

What are the current priorities of the Slovak Republic regarding water protection?

The Slovak Republic fulfils its obligations in the sustainable use of water and in the protection of valuable water resources at the national level, as they result from its membership in the European Union, as well as to other Member States.

In addition, it ensures cooperation and coordination of individual activities at the bilateral and multilateral level. The priorities of the Slovak Republic are directly connected to the mentioned national, bilateral, and multilateral obligations and I am directly or indirectly responsible for their fulfilment.

Among the main priorities of the Slovak Republic are obligations related to the achievement of good water status, both groundwater and surface water bodies. For this, it is necessary to have responsibly managed transposition of the relevant directives, in particular the Water Framework Directive, the Flood Directive, the Directive on the Treatment of Municipal Waste Water, the Directive on the Protection of Water from Nitrate Pollution from Agricultural Sources, the Directive on the Protection of Groundwater from Pollution and Quality Deterioration, the Directive on the Management of the Quality of Water Intended for Bathing, the Directive on Environmental Quality Standards in the Field of Water Policy and, last but not least, the Directive on the Quality of Water Intended for Human Consumption.

Responsibly managed transposition of the aforementioned directives into the national legislation of the Slovak Republic, in particular the Water Act, Act on Public Drinking Water Systems and Public Sewerage Systems, the Flood Protection Act and others, as well as their implementing regulations, provides space for the implementation of measures necessary to achieve individual goals to correspond to the mentioned priorities. Individual measures are proposed separately for surface water and groundwater bodies, both in terms of their quantity and quality.

Basic measures include not only legislative ones, but also measures related to the optimization of financial and human resources and, last but not least, technical and ecological measures. I would emphasize water monitoring as one of the basic measures, the results of which are an essential basis for determining individual basic and additional technical measures. This is related to setting of models and funding sources (from the state budget or European Union funds, or any other sources) on which, among other things, the quantity and quality of human resources depend not only for science and research, but also for planning, projecting, implementation, or the operation of individual measures.

Basic and additional measures in the Slovak Republic are summarized in the Programme of Measures, which forms an annex to the Water Plan of the Slovak Republic. It is being developed for a period of six years; its third update for 2022–2027 is currently available and consists of the Danube Basin Management Plan and the Vistula Basin Management Plan. In addition to the Water Plan, the measures are also found in other strategic, planning, and conceptual documents and their updates; in the Slovak Republic, for example, in Flood Risk Management Plans in Sub-Basins of the Slovak Republic, in Plan for the Development of Public Water Supply and Sewerage Systems for the Slovak Republic, but also in Concept of Water Policy until 2030 with an Outlook to 2050, or in the Action Plan for Dealing with the Consequences of Drought and Lack of Water – H₂ODNOTA JE VODA (Water is the Value).

So, in conclusion, I will summarize that the priorities of the Slovak Republic, in addition to protecting the quality of water resources and ensuring biodiversity through the protection of habitats and ecosystems, are currently mainly focused on ensuring the supply of drinking water to the population, the drainage of agglomerations, but also on ensuring the protection of the population against floods, as well as on providing sufficient water according to priorities for its individual users continuously and especially during the dry season (water for drinking purposes, water for agriculture, water for industry, cooling water for nuclear power plants, water for the use of hydropower potential, water for navigation, water for recreational purposes, water for fish breeding, etc.).

This year, the Slovak Republic chairs the largest commission focused on the protection of watercourses, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube. You yourself hold the position of its President. With what goals did you enter this position?

Yes, it is true that the Slovak Republic has the honour of chairing the International Commission for the Protection of Danube Waters (ICPDR) in 2024. This year is special because we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Convention on Cooperation in the Protection and Sustainable Use of the Danube River, which was signed on 29th June 1994 in Sofia and, at the same time, the 20th anniversary of the establishment of 29th June as Danube Day.

I am personally honoured that in the year of my 50th birthday I can represent the Slovak Republic during the presidency of the ICPDR as its president.

(Editor's note: you can read more about the goals of the Slovak Republic in the ICPDR in a separate article about the presidency of the Slovak Republic in the ICPDR after this interview.)

You also hold other important positions. You are, for example, the government representative for water management issues on border waters

with neighbouring states. What current issues are on the agenda with the Czech Republic?

It has been the floods during September 2024, which mainly affected Central Europe and, in addition to the Slovak Republic, affected the Czech Republic in an incomparably more destructive form, as well as Poland and Lower Austria.

As part of the flood in question, there was a regular exchange of information and coordination of the implementation of necessary measures, or securing and rescue work, especially on the joint section of the Morava river along the Slovak-Czech border. The cooperation was carried out through the Slovak-Czech Border Water Commission and the technical issues working group established by it, as well as through communication between the Morava managers and the hydrometeorological institutes on both sides in accordance with the intergovernmental agreement on cooperation on border waters, i.e. Directive on the warning and notification service on border waters. The situation will be evaluated and recorded in the Protocol from the next, 25th meeting of the Slovak-Czech Border Water Commission, which will take place in 2025 in the Czech Republic. The knowledge gained will be used in the possible optimization of cooperation in the mentioned area.

In the long term, we are trying to cooperate, or to provide relevant documents to the ministries of finance on both sides, in order to settle the property of the managers of border watercourses important from the water management point of view. The question of the fixed or movable state border on border waters also remains open.

In conclusion, I must mention the continuous exchange of information and data in the field of hydrology and water quality protection, but also the implementation of individual technical measures related to the development of waterways and navigation.

Cooperation with other countries is also interesting. Thanks to your long-term involvement in border waters, can you compare the specifics of these negotiations?

The fundamental difference in the negotiations of individual Commissions for Border Waters with neighbouring states compared to the Slovak-Czech Border Water Commission, but also in the negotiations of individual working groups established within the said commission, is the fact that we still do not need an interpreter, which accelerates the negotiations and brings a different atmosphere to them. With this statement, I would close the question for the time being, as the details and specifics of the negotiations of the Border Water Commission with individual neighbouring states would require a separate interview. -:)

Tell the readers about your visions, your plans or a specific project that you would like to implement.

Of course, each of us has some "secret dreams". I must say that I envy the generations that established and built things and whose results still serve us today. Therefore, I would be happy if I could be part of a team that can manage and ensure the construction of either single-purpose or multi-purpose water structures for the society, which will provide prosperity for the entire society and ensure sufficient water that can be used in the dry season, and at the same time ensure the protection of life and property of citizens during floods. However, considering the current situation in the society, this is more of a long-term plan.

From a medium-term point of view, I consider it necessary to contribute with correct proposals and information for the Ministry to the financial and personnel stabilization of state enterprises, which ensure the management of watercourses and water structures owned by the state.

Finally, I will mention short-term "projects", or visions, and these are, on the one hand, the necessity of stabilizing and rejuvenating the Directorate of Water Policy

team, as in the previous period, several job positions were scrapped, while several employees are in pre-retirement and retirement age. I believe that, in cooperation with my colleagues, I will also succeed in the update of the Water Policy Concept of the Slovak Republic until 2030, with an outlook to 2050, so that the measures that were included by political decision and without relevant assessment are removed from it. Among other things, this would also open up space for the implementation of the aforementioned long-term "project", or vision.

In conclusion, I would like to make a wish for society to return to pragmatism in decision-making and suppress ecological extremism insulting water managers, respectively civil engineers as representatives of the "concrete lobby" and so on.

It is no secret that you have a son. Will he follow in his father's footsteps?

As they say, "never say never", but considering the above and the current situation, I dare say that "the apple does not fall far from the tree" will not apply in this case. My son will finish his studies at the eight-year secondary school this school year, and there is no indication yet that he will pursue after graduation the field of water management, which of course I will not begrudge him in any way.

Anyway, I will cheer him on and support him in his further progress, regardless of the field he chooses; after all, no one forced me to study the chosen field either.

Director General, thank you very much for your time for our interview.

Ing. Josef Nistler

Ing. Vladimír Novák

Ing. Vladimír Novák was born on 31 May 1974 in Bratislava. He studied hydraulic engineering at the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the Slovak Technical University in Bratislava. He is an expert in water management. On the basis of a government resolution, he was appointed to the position of representative of the Slovak government for cooperation on border waters with neighbouring states (the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Hungary, and Austria) and to the position of chairman of the Slovak part of the Slovak-Polish Border Water Commission. He was first director of the Waterborne Transport Development Agency (from 2011). As a member of the Slovak government delegation, he also participated and participates in the negotiations with the Hungarian government delegation, the goal of which is to end the long-term discussions to find a definitive joint solution to the open questions related to the System of Water Works named Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros. His work is also connected with the representation of Slovakia in multilateral platforms, such as informal meetings of the Water and Marine Directors of the European Union and activities in the Priority Area 4 (PA4) "Maintain and Restore the Quality of Waters" of the European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). He is currently Director General of the Directorate of Water Policy of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) President for 2024, a water management expert in the permanent border commissions for issues of the character and laying out of the state border and, last but not least, the long-term chairman of the Slovak Navigation Congress.

