



Civic Forum and Public Against Violence after the Elections

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The overwhelming victory of the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence in the Czechoslovak parliamentary elections on June 8 and 9 is unlikely to produce a consensus in future top-level decision making. Both movements are rather heterogeneous, serving as umbrella organizations for a variety of small political parties and civic groups with disparate philosophies. Brought together by the need to defeat the Communists and demolish the totalitarian system, the groups constituting the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence may now start to assert their individual political identities.

Although the Civic Forum and its Slovak counterpart, the Public against Violence, gained an absolute majority in the Czechoslovak parliamentary elections, their victory is not likely to lead to unanimity on decisions concerning Czechoslovakia's immediate future. Two factors contribute to the lack of consensus that will probably arise. First, the Christian Democrats, or some other party, will quite possibly be represented in any government the movements form. Second, the two movements themselves are broad alliances of organizations and individuals representing political philosophies that range from the left to the right of the political spectrum. Therefore, the scope of the political pluralism established by the elections goes far beyond the six parties and

movements represented in the new Federal Assembly.¹

Until the elections, the differences between the various groups and individual philosophies represented by the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence had been bridged by the need to defeat the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and establish a firm democratic foundation. Now that these goals have been achieved, various groups may try to step out of the shadow of the umbrella movements. The attempt to assert their own identities should be made easier by the fact that the members of these groups will be represented in the Federal Assembly. Although formally they will be representing the two movements, they will also be keeping an eye on the 1992 elections. By then, the Czechoslovak political

spectrum will be much more diversified and the voters' ability to recognize, and identify with, the new parties much more pronounced. Furthermore, unlike the 1990 elections, those in 1992 will presumably not resemble an anticommunist referendum.

The Civic Forum's Identity

Diversification within the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence is likely to encourage both movements to search for new identities, their present ones being somewhat amorphous. The status of "movement" enjoyed by both was well suited to the revolutionary period that ended with the free elections. It provided the two groups with the organizational flexibility necessary to mobilize large numbers of people and enforce unorthodox policies aimed at eradicating the remnants of totalitarianism. But the ambiguity surrounding the organizational structure and political philosophy of these movements could eventually hinder the development of the political mechanisms that will be needed for a smooth-functioning democracy.

For example, one question the Civic Forum will have to address fairly quickly is the presence of its branches in the work place, made possible by the group's special status and the role it assumed during the November 1989 revolution. In the first months after the revolution, Civic Forum leaders maintained that the continuing presence of the movement's branches in the work place guaranteed that democracy would develop within enterprises. But faced with growing criticism, the leaders eventually promised that the forum's branches would remain in place only until the elections.²

Other changes in the organizational structure of the Civic Forum are also envisaged. Jan Urban, the forum's chief coordinator, has said that the forum will retain its present form only until the local government elections in the fall. After the elections, a nationwide conference of forum activists will decide what organizational structure the forum should adopt. Forum leaders have mentioned three options: disbanding the movement, transforming it into a political party on traditional lines, or turning it into a nonpolitical organization that would function at a local level as "clubs" providing advice on important matters.³ Completely disbanding the Civic Forum seems an unlikely option, since the top leadership does not seem to have the power to end the movement's existence. Therefore, some kind of an organizational transformation seems likely.

It is not clear if the Public against Violence foresees similar changes within its organization; but given the close cooperation that has existed between the two movements, the Public against Violence is likely to follow the Civic Forum's lead. Besides changing their organizational structures, the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence will have to define their ideological leanings more precisely. The various ideological strands the two movements currently unite will separate when it becomes obvious that the reasons for their cohesion—the struggle to defeat communist totalitarianism and win representation in the assembly—no longer exist. Only after the elections will the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence have the chance to implement their basically centrist platform, the practical implications of which are likely to alienate some of the rightist and leftist groups now belonging to the movements.

Asked to define the Civic Forum, Jan Urban said that it was nonsensical to use terms borrowed from traditionally democratic societies to describe it. He described the forum as a "rescue operation [designed] to cope with the major problems facing a country ravaged by decades of mismanagement and neglect."⁴ But if the forum, having decided to continue to play a role in Czechoslovak politics, transforms itself into a political party, it will have to do just what Urban says it cannot: define itself in the very terms used by traditional democracies. Playing the role of a party that stands near the political center and represents a relatively broad political platform seems the most appropriate option. The movement has served as a political center of gravity since the revolution began, with most other parties linking their political and economic programs to some kind of traditional political ideology, such as socialism, social democracy, or Christian democracy. Although the overwhelming election victory can be attributed in part to both the popular figures who ran on the two movements' tickets and the role the groups played in toppling the communist regime, the possibility that many voters cast their votes for a broad, ideology-free program should not be discounted.

The majority of the movements' leaders and most prominent members seem to identify fully with the "centrist" role the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence have played until now. The political inclinations of these leaders increase the possibility that the movements will eventually form either a party close to the political center offering a

broad political and economic platform or a politically neutral civic movement. Some leaders may opt to join other parties whose political programs better correspond to their own.

Splinter Groups

Should the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence choose to transform themselves into a political party, some of the groups that have been affiliated with the two movements may leave; others may choose to merge with a new party. Paradoxically, the group most likely to leave the Civic Forum is the Democratic Initiative, whose liberal political philosophy most closely resembles the forum's own. But the Democratic Initiative, the strongest party currently associated with the Civic Forum, has the most fully developed organizational structure as well as an independent leadership. It also has a sister organization in Slovakia, the Liberal Democratic Party. The party will clearly benefit from its election alliance with the Civic Forum, and several of its top officials will sit in the new assembly.

Other parties and groups associated with the Civic Forum that may eventually embark on their own political path include the Agrarian Party, the Left Alternative, Obroda—The Club for Socialist Restructuring, the Republican Party, and the Party for the Defense of Culture. In Slovakia, the relative electoral success enjoyed by independent groups representing ethnic and nationalist concerns could mean that groups representing ethnic minorities, such as the Gypsy Civic Initiative, will seriously consider splitting off from the Public against Violence.

Assessment

Ironically, the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence may face an identity crisis shortly after their impressive election victory. Born in revolutionary ferment and characterized by loose organizational structures and a lack of ideological discipline, the two movements may have to start behaving like real political parties in the system of parliamentary democracy they have helped to create. On the other hand, as the internal pluralism of the two movements becomes more apparent to onlookers, it may help enrich the political spectrum represented by the six parties and movements elected to the assembly. Given the fact that three of these parties have ethnic, nationalistic, or minority agendas, the possible emergence of independent parties such as the Democratic Initiative or the Republican Party from the Civic Forum's shadow may result in refreshing additions to the Czechoslovak political scene.

Even if the various groups associated with the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence do not seek full independence in the near future, however, their voices are likely to be heard when the Civic Forum and Public against Violence begin to formulate policies. This participation will ensure that the two movements are not tempted to use their absolute majority in the assembly to circumvent the rules of a truly democratic discussion of important policies. But whatever happens, the political system the two movements did so much to create is likely to transform the way both movements function.

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1. The six parties are The Civic Forum/Public against Violence, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Christian and Democratic Union, the Movement for Self-Administrative Democracy/Association for Moravia and Silesia, the Slovak National Party, and Coexistence, which represents ethnic minorities' interests (Radio Czechoslovakia, June 10, 1990, 7:35 P.M.).
2. See Jiri Pehe, "The Civic Forum Before the Election Campaign Begins," *Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 14, April 6, 1990.
3. Reuter, June 10, 1990; Radio Czechoslovakia, June 9, 1990, 6:00 P.M.
4. Radio Prague, June 9, 1990, 10:30 P.M.