

Czechoslovak Socialist Party in Deep Crisis after Election Defeat

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After failing to win any seats in either the Federal Assembly or the Czech National Council, the Czechoslovak Socialist Party plunged into a deep crisis that culminated in the resignation of its entire leadership. Prior to the elections, the party was seen as having a good chance of becoming an important factor in Czechoslovak politics. But its new leaders' methods, viewed by many as authoritarian, plus a badly run election campaign, damaged its image. Despite the party's collaboration with the Communists over the past four decades, its popularity had been fairly high at the beginning of the year because of its active participation in the November 1989 revolution.

On June 20 the entire leadership of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party (CSS), including its chairman Jiri Vyvadil, resigned. A new leadership of the party was named a day later and Vyvadil was reinstated in his post; but on June 25 Vyvadil stepped down. Since its failure to win any seats in either the Federal Assembly (the national parliament) or the Czech National Council (the parliament of the Czech Republic), the CSS, a highly visible part of the Czechoslovak politic scene for almost 100 years, has been in turmoil. The party's failure in the elections is particularly disappointing, because the CSS had been quite popular after the active part it played in toppling the communist regime during the November 1989 revolution. Opinion polls taken in the first months of 1990 indicated that the party would do quite well in the elections, despite the fact that prior to the November events it had been a communist party satellite for more than 40 years.¹

History Distant and Recent

The party grew out of the national unrest among Czechs and Germans that erupted in the fall of 1897. A rival of the internationally oriented Czech Social Democratic Movement, it was founded as the National and Social Party at a continental congress in 1898. Associated with the policies of Presidents Tomas G. Masaryk (who was never a member of the party) and Eduard Benes (who gave up his membership when he was appointed Foreign Minister), it played an important role in Czechoslovak

politics before World War II. During the interwar period the party was called the National Socialist Party; despite its name, it had no ideological affinities with the German National Socialists. After the communist takeover in 1948, the party became a communist satellite, assuming its present name.

On November 19, 1989, CSS representatives, including its Chairman Jan Skoda, participated in the meeting in Prague at which the Civic Forum was set up. During the next few days, opposition figures used the balcony of the CSS's publishing house, Melantrich, to address the large crowds that gathered daily in Wenceslas Square. In December 1989 the CSS took part in round-table talks among major Czechoslovak political forces and helped with the extensive personnel changes being carried out in top state bodies.

During a party congress on March 16 and 17, the CSS merged with its exile wing, the National Socialist Party, which had been kept alive in the West by members who fled Czechoslovakia after the communist putsch. The CSS refused, however, to revert to its pre-1948 name. Jiri Vyvadil, the 35-year-old lawyer who had led the CSS delegation to the round-table talks, replaced Skoda after the congress had given him a slight majority of votes. Skoda was elected a deputy chairman, and the party went on to approve its own electoral platform. Although the philosophy of the original National Socialist Party had been basically liberal, the new platform contained distinct social democratic elements.²

The Growing Crisis

The first signs of impending crisis within the CSS surfaced prior to the elections, when some party members accused Vyvadil of using authoritarian methods and of trying to force the editors of publications published under the party's aegis to adhere more strictly to the line of the party's leadership. In response to pressure from Vyvadil, journalists on the CSS daily *Svobodne Slovo*, which had become popular during the November revolution because of its open and objective reporting, left the newspaper to seek employment with other publications.

Vyvadil also caused uneasiness within the party by making statements during the election campaign that were seen as damaging to the CSS's image. For example, he repeatedly stressed that the party was concerned primarily with its showing in the Czech Republic, although the CSS was also running in Slovakia.³ Vyvadil also seemed unwilling to exploit Skoda's popularity, although the former chairman had become a respected public figure after helping to found the Civic Forum.

In the June 8 and 9 parliamentary elections, the CSS won about 2.7% of the national vote, but only 0.06% in Slovakia. It needed at least 5% of the vote to gain seats in the assembly. In the Czech National Council elections, the Socialists received only 2.68% of the vote, again failing to pass the 5% threshold necessary to win seats.⁴ Reacting to the election defeat, Vyvadil said the party had obviously lost supporters to the Civic Forum, since many voters viewed the elections as an anticommunist referendum and had therefore opted for the forum, which had been leading the anticommunist revolt.⁵ Vyvadil denied reports that the party had invested 27,000,000 koruny in its election campaign and not the 8,000,000 koruny it officially claimed it had. Vyvadil also refused to accept any personal responsibility for the election defeat, pointing out that he had received more votes than any other CSS candidate running for the Federal Assembly.

Immediately after the elections, the CSS leadership proposed creating a broad, extraparliamentary coalition of parties representing the democratic left. It also set up a party commission to examine the reasons for the party's defeat in the elections and proposed a referendum among party members to decide whether the party should reassume its pre-1948 name, the National Socialist Party.⁶

On June 13 *Svobodne Slovo* published an open letter to Vyvadil signed by the party daily's editor in

chief, the editors of two weeklies published under the party's aegis, and the Director of Melantrich. The four editors demanded that Vyvadil step down as CSS Chairman. "Your politically immature behavior in public and your attitude toward the publishing company Melantrich damaged the image of our party and contributed to its failure," they wrote. They also accused Vyvadil of having personal ambitions that he often placed before the party's interests, and they called for an extraordinary CSS congress.

Vyvadil responded by dismissing both the Editor of *Svobodne Slovo* and the Director of Melantrich. On June 20 the staff of *Svobodne Slovo* went on strike to protest Vyvadil's decision. The front page of that day's newspaper carried only the word "Strike" diagonally in large letters across the entire sheet.⁷ The Syndicate of Czech Journalists issued a statement accusing "some political parties" of trying to restrict freedom of the press. Participants in a conference of the CSS's Prague branch on June 20 passed a resolution demanding the resignation of Vyvadil, the Presidium, and the party's entire Central Committee. The document also demanded that the dismissed journalists be reinstated and an extraordinary congress of the party be called. Finally, it proposed creating a provisional leadership that would begin preparing the party for next fall's local government elections.⁸

Also on June 20, six top party officials resigned from the leadership "to protest Jiri Vyvadil's authoritarianism." Skoda and Jaroslav Safarik, Chairman of the Czech National Council before the elections, were among the six.⁹ The same evening Vyvadil and the entire CSS Presidium resigned.¹⁰ On June 21 the CSS Central Committee elected a new 13-member Presidium but reinstated Vyvadil, along with the Director of Melantrich and the Editor in Chief of *Svobodne Slovo*. The Central Committee rejected the resolution passed by the CSS's Prague branch. At the same time, it announced that Melantrich would be turned into a joint-stock company.¹¹

On June 25, apparently realizing the untenability of his position, Vyvadil stepped down. The CSS presidium accepted his resignation and named deputy chairman Milan Adam to replace him. The presidium also announced that it would ask the central committee of the CSS to call an extraordinary congress of the party for September 1990 and that it would hold a referendum among party members on changing the name of the party.¹²

Assessment

Vyvadil's continued tenure as Chairman of the CSS would probably have prolonged the current crisis within the party, since Vyvadil has been the at the center of the recent disputes that have paralyzed the organization. Indeed, a decision to reinstate Vyvadil might have caused a clash between the party's various factions. The powerful CSS organization in Prague, which had demanded that both Vyvadil and the Central Committee resign, did not appear at all ready to give up those demands. (In the parliamentary elections the CSS received 6.4% of the vote in Prague, by far the strongest support the CSS was able to muster in any one electoral region.)

If the CSS does not manage to sort out its leadership problems quickly and work out a viable strategy for the local government elections planned for the fall, and if it does not perform well in these

elections, it may well disintegrate. Its dissolution would mean the disappearance of one of the oldest political institutions in Czechoslovakia. In forming its new strategy, the party will have to decide whether it wants to continue projecting the image of a leftist, socialist party. The "democratic left" fared extremely badly in the parliamentary elections, and no party that could be described as "social democratic" in orientation is represented in either the Federal Assembly or the National Councils. In light of this development, the party may have to consider seriously returning to its earlier liberal democratic philosophy and its original name. Given that the party's finances are still relatively sound (it will continue to benefit from its association with the very popular Melantrich publishing company) the CSS could win back some of its lost popularity. But its future depends largely on the political skills of its new leadership.

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Notes:

1. See, for example, "Czechoslovak Opinion Poll Shows Support for New Political Movements," *Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 7, February 16, 1990.
2. See Jiri Pehe, "Former Satellite Parties Seek Their Own Identity," *ibid.*, no. 15, April 13, 1990.
3. See, for example, an interview with Vyvadil broadcast by Radio Free Europe on May 15, 1990, 6:20 P.M.
4. *Hospodarske Noviny*, June 14, 1990.
5. *Lidove Noviny*, June 14, 1990.
6. *Svobodne Slovo*, June 13, 1990.
7. Reuter and AP, June 20, 1990.
8. Radio Czechoslovakia, June 20, 1990, 6:00 A.M.
9. AFP, June 20, 1990.
10. Radio Czechoslovakia, June 20, 1990, 10:30 P.M.
11. Radio Prague, June 21, 1990, 6:30 P.M.
12. Radio Czechoslovakia, June 25, 1990, 10:00 P.M.