



The Civic Forum Becomes a Political Party

Jiri Pehe

The Civic Forum, the movement that spearheaded the democratic revolution in 1989 and emerged victorious from the parliamentary elections in June 1990, voted at its congress in Prague on January 12 and 13 to transform itself into a political party. At the same congress, the forum adopted a new program, approved organizational principles, and elected a 17-member executive council. Minister of Finance Vaclav Klaus was re-elected the forum's chairman.

On January 12 and 13, the Civic Forum, the leading political movement in Czechoslovakia, held a congress in Prague at which it was decided that the movement would become a political party with a solid internal structure, a clear-cut political program, and "ideological discipline." The congress followed months of heated discussion among the movement's leaders and membership about the Civic Forum's future.

Some of the forum's members argued that it should remain a heterogeneous movement serving as a political umbrella for a number of groups and organizations ranging from the left to the right of Czechoslovakia's political spectrum; others wanted the movement to transform itself into a political party with a firmly defined internal structure and "ideological discipline." The proponents of the latter path argued that the loose internal structure of the movement and the fact that it was willing to accommodate different political philosophies stood in the way of its ability to formulate and pursue a clear-cut program and enforce its political will. They claimed that the absence of an internal hierarchical

structure had been useful during the initial stages of the revolution, when it had helped the forum mobilize large numbers of people representing virtually the entire political spectrum. However, they saw these same characteristics as impeding the Civic Forum's ability to govern the country as a party of the government. They maintained that the forum's cabinet members and deputies, both in the federal and the Czech republican parliaments, often seemed to pursue their own agendas rather than the election program of the movement.¹

Recent Developments

The discussions intensified in October, when Minister of Finance Vaclav Klaus was elected the forum's chairman. Klaus argued that the movement needed to be structurally and "ideologically" streamlined in order to survive. His election came only three days after right-of-center deputies of the Civic Forum in the Federal Assembly and the Czech National Council founded an Interparliamentary Club of the Democratic Right.² The club claimed that the heterogeneity of opinions within the Civic

Forum had contributed to the delay in seeking solutions to Czechoslovakia's pressing economic problems and been responsible for "a lack of vision and a degree of indecisiveness on the part of the movement's leaders."

Several days after the formation of the club and Klaus's election as the forum's chairman, attempts were made by Klaus's supporters to expel from the forum two leftist groups, the Club for Socialist Restructuring (*Obroda*) and the Left Alternative. However, both groups objected to these efforts, and the decision was in the end left to the Civic Forum's congress.³ The pressure on the two groups prompted several dozen deputies of the Civic Forum to form the Interparliamentary Civic Association. The new group issued a statement condemning the attempts to "split the forum" and criticized the movement's new leadership for allegedly "deserting the founding principles of the Civic Forum."⁴

The Interparliamentary Civic Association had not begun to function as a permanent group before it was superseded by another new interparliamentary group, the Liberal Club of the Civic Forum, founded in early December 1990. Many of those who had signed the Interparliamentary Civic Association's statement could be found among the more than 90 signatories to the new club's founding manifesto.⁵ Eight of the ten federal ministers belonging to the Civic Forum were also among the signatories. The members of the club described themselves as "centrists." Their political program was not very clear, however, and the club's main objective seemed to be to prevent Klaus and his followers from transforming the Civic Forum into a right-wing political party. Some of the club's leading proponents, such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiri Dienstbier and Deputy Prime Minister Pavel Rychetsky, argued that the Civic Forum should remain a broadly based political movement. Others, such as Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart, appealed for the transformation of the forum into a political party, which would, however, continue to embrace different political philosophies.

The establishment of the Liberal Club of the Civic Forum was partly a reaction to the results of the forum's conference held on December 8, 1990, in the Moravian city of Olomouc. The delegates to the conference lent strong support to Klaus's plan to transform the Civic Forum into a right-of-center political party with a firmly defined internal structure.⁶ The growing conflict between the followers of the Liberal Club and Klaus's supporters was perceived as a danger to the forum's unity. In late December 1990 and the beginning of January 1991, leading Czechoslovak politicians

repeatedly warned against a possible split within the forum. Some argued that the split, or the outright disintegration of the movement, would cast doubt on the legitimacy of its cabinet members and deputies and might lead to the collapse of the Civic Forum-led government and to early parliamentary elections.⁷

On the eve of the Civic Forum's crucial congress, Klaus said that a split could be avoided, but he insisted on strengthening the forum's internal structure and on transforming it into a political party. "We need to know who is in the Civic Forum, who supports the Civic Forum," Klaus said. "If someone claims to speak for the Civic Forum, we must have proof."⁸ In an appeal read out at the congress, President Vaclav Havel, who had helped found the forum in November 1989 and had led it in its first weeks, urged the congress to avoid decisions that could cause the movement to split into rival political parties. Havel said that a split would be "thoroughly irresponsible" and a betrayal of the forum's supporters.⁹

The Civic Forum Becomes a Political Party

In his opening speech to the congress, Klaus said that the movement had lost its ability to focus and needed to become a political party. He said that its internal conflicts were caused by a need to "move beyond revolution and on to the business of governing."¹⁰ In the end, 126 of the congress's 175 delegates voted in favor of transforming the Civic Forum into a political party with a firmly defined internal structure and a clear-cut program.

The congress also approved a new, 10-point program for the Civic Forum. It called for market reforms and the building of a modern democratic society based on Western traditions and democracy. It explicitly rejected "any form of socialism" and called for the introduction of "what is usually referred to as capitalism." It said that Czechoslovakia's foreign policy should be aimed at defending its borders, gaining membership in the European Community, and ensuring free association and contact between Czechoslovak citizens and foreigners abroad. The program described the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as "the guarantor of peace and freedom."¹¹ Some delegates suggested that the program should be more flexible and that there should be "room among Civic Forum members for a differentiation of opinions." These proposals were voted down.

Commenting on the program, Klaus said that it did not make sense to attach labels to the new party on the basis of its program. He argued that labels such as "rightist," "leftist," and "centrist" did not mean much in the Czechoslovak political context. The most important thing, said Klaus,

was that the program be clear and unambiguous and therefore one that people could either identify with or reject.¹² He noted that the new program was based on previous programs of the Civic Forum but that it also introduced a new element, inasmuch as it rejected "socialist ideologies of any type." Klaus described the program as stressing individualism and rejecting any "collectivist utopias" as well as "false social demagoguery."

New Organizational Principles and Leadership

On January 13 the delegates discussed the new organizational statutes of the Civic Forum. It was decided that membership in the party should be limited and that a Civic Forum member could not belong to any other political group. Collective membership was also rejected: members of political parties and groups associated with the Civic Forum would have to decide whether they wanted to become individual members of the Civic Forum or leave it and remain in their party or group. (Two political groups, the Club of Engaged Nonpartisans and the Movement for Civic Liberties, quickly announced that they would leave the Civic Forum.) In addition, it was decided that all members of the Civic Forum would have to register, carry membership cards, and pay membership dues.¹³ Members would be bound by the Civic Forum's program and statutes.

The congress decided that the Civic Forum would have clearly defined vertical and horizontal structures. Lower bodies of the forum would be subordinated to the higher ones. Officials of the district coordination centers as well as the republican coordination center of the forum would be subordinated to the political leadership of the forum represented by a 17-member Executive Council. The council would be composed of ten representatives of districts and six representatives each from the two interparliamentary clubs, the Liberal Club and the Interparliamentary Club of the Democratic Right. Vojtech Sedlacek, a former Chairman of the Coordination Center of the Civic Forum, was elected Secretary of the Executive Council. Klaus was re-elected the forum's chairman.¹⁴

The delegates also decided that no former collaborators of the secret police or members of the People's Militia, the private army of the communist party, would be allowed to join the Civic Forum. The proposal to bar from membership all former members of the communist party or members of the so-called satellite political parties that had collaborated with the Communists under the communist regime was voted down after a heated debate.¹⁵ The delegates also strongly condemned the Soviet military action in Lithuania and

expressed support for the democratic governments of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.¹⁶

Assessment

Although the congress itself was less dramatic than expected, the decisions reached by its delegates may yet have dramatic consequences. The congress's outcome, clearly a victory for Klaus and his supporters, may still provoke some of the members of the Liberal Club to leave the new party. Klaus himself implied that he expected some members of the Liberal Club to disengage themselves from the forum: "The outright rejection of socialism in the program of the Civic Forum is, in my opinion, totally unacceptable to a number of the Liberal Club's members."¹⁷

However, leading members of the Liberal Club, while criticizing the congress as "undemocratic" and expressing reservations about the forum's new program and structure, said they would remain in the new party in order to avert a political split. Some of the club's members also complained of the lack of tolerance at the congress and the inability of some people to listen to the opinions of others.¹⁸ Klaus retorted that he was shocked by the ability of "some people to become turncoats."¹⁹

On another note, some of the Liberal Club's spokesmen claimed that the current law on political parties did not provide for the transformation of the Civic Forum from a political movement to a political party. They did not say, however, whether they planned to challenge the congress's decision in a court of law. A new law on political parties to be adopted later this year is expected to define conditions under which political parties' structures, names, and programs may be changed. Klaus said that a change of name would probably constitute the biggest legal and technical problem for the Civic Forum, but he added that the party's members did not envisage any such change in the foreseeable future.

The results of the congress suggest that Klaus and his supporters strengthened their control over the Civic Forum. Their opponents will have to conform to its new political line or leave. The fact that the Liberal Club is to be represented on the forum's executive council, however, indicates that the club will continue to play an important role and that an outright split might be averted, at least for the time being. The conflicts between Klaus's supporters and his opponents have by no means been resolved, however; and they will doubtless be pursued both inside and outside the Civic Forum's ranks. Pressure may be applied to force some of the Liberal Club's ministers in the federal and

Czech governments either to conform to the new political line of the forum or to resign. Efforts to apply the same strategy to the deputies of the Civic Forum in the federal and Czech parliaments may be more difficult, because the electoral law does not provide for the recall of deputies by

the electorate or by a political party. Thus, the parliaments could easily become a battleground for the competing factions of a single political group.

CS0049.91R

January 21, 1991

Notes:

1 For more details, see Jiri Pehe and Jan Obrman, "The Civic Forum Shifts to the Right," *Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 47, November 23, 1990.

2 For the club's program, see *Lidove Noviny*, October 12, 1990, p. 2.

3 *Zemedelske Noviny*, October 26, 1990, p. 1.

4 Reuter, October 31, 1990.

5 See CTK, December 13, 1990; and Czechoslovak Television, December 13, 1990, 7:30 P.M.

6 Radio Prague, December 8, 1990, 6:30 P.M.

7 Reuter, January 7, 1991; and CTK, January 9, 1991.

8 Reuter, January 11, 1991.

9 CTK, January 12, 1991.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 Radio Prague, January 12, 1991, 6:30 P.M.

13 *Ibid.*, January 13, 1991, 6:30 P.M.

14 CTK, January 13, 1991.

15 Radio Czechoslovakia, January 13, 1991, 2:55 P.M.

16 CTK, January 13, 1991.

17 Radio Czechoslovakia, January 12, 1991, 9:00 P.M.

18 AFP, January 13, 1991.

19 Radio Czechoslovakia, January 12, 1991,

9:00 P.M.

The Parliament Approves Screening of Deputies

Jan Obrman

Amid charges that a number of leading Czechoslovak politicians had been informers for the state security police under the communist regime, the Federal Assembly approved a resolution calling for the screening of all of its members. The measure may cause the new political elite some embarrassment, but it is expected to have a stabilizing effect in the long run.

On January 10 the Federal Assembly passed a resolution calling for the screening of all members of the parliament and the federal government to determine which deputies collaborated with the state security police under the communist regime. The document stated that it was unacceptable for former state security agents to continue to represent the country in its highest bodies.¹ A special parliamentary commission, which was formed to investigate the events that led to the overthrow of the communist regime in November 1989, will be responsible for vetting the deputies.

Background

Since the overthrow of the previous regime, the new political establishment has been plagued by charges

that many of its new public figures had been active state security agents or informers, both voluntary and involuntary, of the once mighty police apparatus. Controversy first erupted in late December 1989, during Richard Sacher's tenure as Minister of Internal Affairs. Sacher was criticized for having a lax attitude toward the state security service; for allowing many compromised officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to remain in their posts²; and, above all, for allegedly not preventing the destruction of important state security files. Despite the fact, however, that an unknown but presumably large portion of the state security service's files and archives were destroyed or, as some experts suspect, transferred to the Soviet Union following the communist regime's fall, enough material remained intact to cause the new government great embarrassment.