



The Realignment of Political Forces

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Since the beginning of 1991, the political landscape in Czechoslovakia has changed dramatically. The Civic Forum and the Public against Violence, the umbrella movements that in coalition scored a resounding victory in the parliamentary elections of June 1990, have both disintegrated. This process, together with developments in other political parties, has brought about a rapid differentiation of the country's political spectrum. More obviously than at any time since the democratic revolution in late 1989, this spectrum is now divided into right-wing, centrist, and left-wing political forces.

From the beginning of the democratic revolution of November 1989 until the end of 1990, the political system in Czechoslovakia was dominated by the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence, the two political movements that served as organizational umbrellas for a number of smaller political groups and united individuals with widely divergent political views. The two movements emerged spontaneously in November 1989 as broad anticommunist fronts led by former dissidents and cultural figures. Supported by the majority of Czechs and Slovaks, within several weeks of the revolution the two movements managed to oust the Communists from power and transform the political system. The movements did not function as classical political parties, since they lacked a strong internal structure, firm leadership, and a clear-cut political philosophy. Having come into existence as *ad hoc* antitotalitarian alliances, they found it increasingly difficult to work effectively

within the framework of a parliamentary democracy—the political system they themselves had helped bring about.

In the fall of 1990, both movements plunged headlong into an identity crisis. Deputies representing them in the federal and republican parliaments, as well as ministers representing them in the federal and republican governments, did not seem bound by a common political philosophy. Both movements argued that they occupied the political center. Their platforms, however, were rather nebulous, and various politicians associated with the movements seemed increasingly inclined to pursue either left-of-center or right-of-center policies, depending on their true political orientation. By the end of 1990, it had become clear that the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence had fulfilled their role as provisional anticommunist alliances of people with divergent political philosophies and that they would break up into

political groups with more clearly defined political orientations.

This process of differentiation also affected other political forces in Czechoslovakia. Between the end of November 1989 and the end of January 1990, some 40 new political parties came into existence. By the end of July 1990, some 100 parties had officially registered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Most of these new parties portrayed themselves as "right-wing," "centrist," or "left-wing"; but, as in the case of the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence, their platforms were rather vague and their identities underdeveloped. Virtually all the new parties demanded the introduction of a market economy, parliamentary democracy, Czechoslovakia's "return to Europe," and the observance of human rights. Throughout 1990, many of these parties, as well as those in existence prior to the revolution (the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Czechoslovak People's Party, the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, the [Slovak] Party of Freedom, and the [Slovak] Democratic Party), were plagued by internal conflicts and leadership reshuffles in the course of searching for true political identities.

In the first months after the democratic revolution, the terms "right-wing," "centrist," and "left-wing" were, in many respects, inadequate designations for the political orientation of the various parties. The issue that acted as a catalyst in the process of political differentiation was economic reform. While some parties called for minimal state intervention in the economy and rapid privatization, regardless of the social costs, parties that emerged as left-of-center advocated introducing effective welfare measures, creating a stronger role for the state in the economy, and slowing down the pace of privatization. Centrist forces at the time, such as the Civic Forum, tried to find a middle road between these increasingly divergent views.

By the end of 1990, the political system in Czechoslovakia had become fragmented and the process of differentiation had caused splits in some parties. Virtually no strong left-wing, centrist, or right-wing political parties existed. In Slovakia, the situation was further complicated by the fact that in the platforms of most parties, important political and economic issues were overshadowed by national concerns.¹ Although some parties in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia had come to represent one of the traditional Western political philosophies, the only viable political forces that had a clear political orientation and existed outside the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence were the right-of-center Christian democratic parties (in particular, the Christian Democratic Movement in Slovakia) and the Communists. The process of differentiation

among other political forces was, to a certain extent, blocked by the fact that the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence continued to make allies of politicians who might otherwise have emerged as leaders of new left-wing, centrist, or right-wing parties.

Disintegration

Growing conflicts among the representatives of different political currents within the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence resulted in a rapid disintegration of both movements in the first months of 1991. The Civic Forum officially split into two groups, the conservative Civic Democratic Party and the liberal Civic Movement, on February 23, 1991. The move came after weeks of mounting tension between the followers of Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus, who advocated the transformation of the Civic Forum into a right-of-center political party, and those who wanted the Civic Forum to maintain a loose organizational structure and a nebulous centrist image. The split led to the departure from the forum of several smaller groups, such as *Obroda*—The Club for Socialist Restructuring, the Left Alternative, and the Civic Democratic Alliance.

At the end of April, the Civic Democratic Party, the Civic Movement, and the Civic Democratic Alliance held congresses at which they officially constituted themselves as independent political forces with their own platforms. At the congress of the Civic Democratic Party on April 20, it was decided that the new party would have a firm internal structure, would register its members, and would pursue a conservative political agenda. Klaus was elected party chairman.²

The Civic Movement held its congress on April 27. It decided to keep a loose internal structure similar to that of the former Civic Forum but to adopt a platform it described as "liberal." Expressing strong support for radical economic reform, but emphasizing that reform should be accompanied by effective welfare measures, the leaders of the Civic Movement, Foreign Affairs Minister Jiri Dienstbier, Deputy Prime Minister Pavel Rychetsky, and Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart, said that the congress had established a new political force that had liberal views but firmly belonged to the political center. To emphasize the movement's liberal orientation, its leaders invited prominent liberals from the West, including German Foreign Affairs Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, to address the movement's congress.³

The Civic Democratic Alliance held its congress on April 20. Reaffirming its conservative political orientation, the new independent party re-elected Pavel Bratinka its leader. Vladimir Dlouhy, the

federal Minister of Economy, also became one of the group's leaders. The alliance's platform was, in many respects, identical to that of the Civic Democratic Party led by Klaus⁴: both emphasized radical economic reform based on speedy privatization, the establishment of a modern society with Western traditions and democratic values, and cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The Public against Violence's rapid disintegration started on March 5, when Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar founded his own group, the Public against Violence—For a Democratic Slovakia.⁵ Meciar had demanded that the Public against Violence reformulate the platform it had adopted in September 1990 in such a way as to put more emphasis on Slovak national concerns. He had also insisted that the radical economic reform program, formulated at the federal level and supported by the leadership of the Public against Violence, be tailored to Slovakia's own peculiar needs in order to protect it from massive unemployment and other negative effects of rapid privatization. Meciar's move triggered a major political crisis in Slovakia, which on April 23 culminated in the dismissal of Meciar by the Presidium of the Slovak National Council. On April 27 the congress of the Public against Violence authorized the split in the movement.⁶ Both Meciar's group and the group siding with the movement's leadership said they would compete against each other in the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for June 1992. At a meeting held immediately after the congress, the Public against Violence—For a Democratic Slovakia elected Meciar its leader. On May 3 the new group registered with the Slovak Ministry of Internal Affairs under the name Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. At its congress, to be held by the beginning of June, the movement will decide whether to become a political party.

The crisis triggered by the split forced both groups to redefine their political orientation. While the leaders of the Public against Violence had frequently emphasized the centrist-liberal character of their movement, Meciar had repeatedly criticized what he saw as its rightist bent. His new group has yet to formulate its platform in full; but it is already clear that it will stand to the left of the political center and put a strong emphasis on Slovak national concerns. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia has received open support from most major left-wing forces in Czechoslovakia as well as from most nationalist groups in Slovakia.

Realignment

The disintegration of the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence brought about a rapid realignment of the political forces in Czechoslovakia, as a result of which moderately strong

right-wing, centrist, and left-wing groups have come into existence. The Civic Democratic Party quickly established itself as the leader of the right-wing non-Christian parties. In an opinion poll conducted by the Group for Independent Social Analysis at the end of April, Klaus's party received the support of 19% of the respondents, ranking first in the Czech Republic.⁶ Attending its congress on April 20 were representatives of other right-of-center political groups, both Christian and non-Christian, such as the Conservative Party Free Bloc, the People's Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Civic Democratic Alliance, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the Club of Engaged NonPartisans. Thus, it seems that the Civic Democratic Party has the potential to forge a powerful alliance of right-wing groups before the next parliamentary elections.

Cooperation between Klaus's party and the Christian democratic parties, most notably the People's Party, is especially important, not least because differences between the Christian Democrats and the other right-of-center parties have constituted possibly the biggest obstacle to the consolidation of right-wing political forces. Although most of the right-wing parties have similar platforms, the Christian and the non-Christian right-wing parties have found it difficult to communicate, no leading party having emerged among the latter. The Civic Democratic Party, however, could take over such a leading role; and it is quite likely that some of the smaller right-wing parties will eventually decide to merge with it. A tentative agreement has already been reached between the Civic Democratic Party and the Civic Democratic Alliance.⁷

The center of the political spectrum now seems to be firmly occupied by the Civic Movement and what remains of the Public against Violence. Both movements have gone to great lengths to emphasize their "centrist-liberal" political orientation and have forged links with similarly oriented political forces in the West. Yet, both remain reluctant to become political parties, despite admitting that they need to strengthen their internal structures. Although more homogeneous than the movements from which they emerged, they may need to undergo further internal differentiation, as they still unite members who might eventually defect to either left- or right-wing parties.

The left-wing political forces remain fragmented, although there have been attempts to cooperate more closely. As a result of recent political developments, the parties and movements belonging to the left wing have become more easily identifiable. The Czechoslovak Social Democracy and the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, both of which have pursued left-of-center policies since the revolution, have been joined by the Agrarian Party, the Green Party,

and the Association for Moravia and Silesia in an informal alliance. Joint statements on the most important political and economic developments in the country have been issued by this alliance. Three parties have emerged as possible leaders of left-wing politics: the Czechoslovak Social Democracy, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, and the Party of the Democratic Left (the Slovak communist party).

At their congress in April, the Social Democrats announced that six parliamentary deputies previously associated with the Civic Forum had defected to their ranks. These defections meant that the Social Democrats gained representation in the parliament, which they previously had not had. According to recent opinion polls, the popularity of the Social Democrats has increased since the June 1990 parliamentary elections. The party has managed to recruit some members of *Obroda*—The Club for Socialist Restructuring, which split away from the Civic Forum in February. A rival group, the so-called Social Democratic Club of the Civic Forum, condemned the Social Democrats' recruitment of the former reform Communists and announced its intention to form an independent social-democratic party, led by Rudolf Battek, the Deputy Chairman of the Federal Assembly; the group's chances of attracting members appear good. Recently, there have been attempts to reconcile the two camps of Social Democrats. Should these attempts prove successful, the Social Democrats could become an important political force on the Czech political scene, attracting the support of other left-of-center political forces. One such force is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, many of whose members are dissatisfied with the inability of their party to become a modern left-wing force with a social-democratic platform. Although the party approved a platform in October 1990 aimed at building a "modern left-wing party" with a basic social-democratic orientation, its implementation has so far been impeded by the still-strong neo-Stalinist element within the party.

In Slovakia, the Communists have been much more successful in recasting their image. The party renamed itself the Party of the Democratic Left, asked its members to reregister, and adopted a social-democratic platform that put strong emphasis on Slovak national concerns. Like most other parties advocating "national concerns," the Communists support a large degree of political autonomy for Slovakia as well as a modification of the economic reform program to cater for Slovakia's particular needs. Meeting the latter demand would entail increasing the role of the state in the Slovak economy and adopting a slower pace of privatization than that advocated at the federal level. The Slovak

Communists also argue that the republican constitution and various republican institutions should take precedence over the federal ones. With regard to many issues, the party holds the same views as the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, although some of the movement's spokesmen officially deny it has a left-of-center orientation. Both political groups currently enjoy great popularity in Slovakia, which has been badly hit by economic reforms and whose demands for greater national autonomy have become increasingly vocal.⁸ Both groups also found a natural ally in the Slovak National Party, the largest of Slovakia's most strongly nationalist political groups.

Assessment

The political system in Czechoslovakia is entering a new phase. The political movements that led the coalition of antitotalitarian forces in 1990 have either disappeared or been transformed, giving way to a party-based political system. Most of the major political forces have now adopted one of the traditional Western political philosophies—social democracy, liberalism, Christian democracy, or conservatism—and may be labeled right-wing, centrist, or left-wing.

Moreover, it seems that the process of political differentiation has virtually stopped and that forces belonging to the political right, the center, or the left will try either to forge close links or to merge with one another. Although cooperation cutting across party lines and political ideologies, such as was witnessed during the first stages of the revolution, is still evident (for instance, in the form of a joint Civic Forum caucus in the Federal Assembly), cooperation based on similar political philosophies has clearly gained ground. The right-of-center parties represented in the Federal Assembly, to cite one example, have formed a joint caucus for the purpose of coordinating their actions in the assembly.

But the Czechoslovak political system is not yet mature. Some political forces still prefer to function as broad civic movements with neither firm internal structures nor clear-cut political philosophies, although the new political environment has forced them to define their ideologies and structures more precisely. These movements may eventually face some of the problems experienced by the Civic Forum and the Public against Violence; in particular, the lack of internal discipline. There are also several political forces, especially in Slovakia, that belong to neither the right-wing, nor the center, nor the left-wing. These are usually nationalist groups, whose political agendas do not extend far beyond national concerns.

It can be expected that the 1992 parliamentary elections will act as a catalyst in the further

transformation of the Czechoslovak political system. Smaller parties, whether leaning toward the left, the right, or the center, will be under strong pressure either to ally themselves closely or to merge with stronger parties. Unlike the parliamentary elections in June 1990, each part of the political spectrum now seems to have at least one party round which the smaller parties can rally.

Clearly, Czechoslovakia is emerging from the period of antitotalitarian politics and entering an era in which the parties' political and economic platforms will have greater significance for the electorate than their various approaches to removing the last vestiges of communism.

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Notes:

1 See Jiri Pehe, "Party System Struggles to Develop," *Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 43, October 26, 1990.

2 CTK, April 20, 1991.

3 *Ibid.*, April 27, 1991.

4 *Ibid.*, April 20, 1991.

5 See Jiri Pehe, "Growing Slovak Demands Seen as Threat to Federation," *Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 12, March 22, 1991.

6 *Narodna Obroda*, April 29, 1991, p. 1.

7 CTK, April 19, 1991.

8 *Ibid.*, May 3, 1991.

9 *Ibid.*, April 19, 1991.