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Causes of the Breakup of Czecho-Slovakia

It is very hard to find a single explanation to account for the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia (1992).¹ The main reasons are the complicated history of Czech-Slovak relations and the multidimensional nature of the process of disintegration in Czecho-Slovakia in the early 1990s. It is equally hard to extract such a definitive answer from the debates over this subject in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Evaluations of the separation often depend on the political provenance of the author and his or her personal involvement in moves to save or dissolve the federation.

The causes of the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia are of an external and internal nature.

External Factors

Dismantling the "Communist deep-freeze". A significant determinant of the situation of the Czechoslovak federation was the Soviet Union's loss of its hegemonic position in Central and Eastern Europe. With respect to nationality issues a phrase commonly used by political scientists is "dismantling the Communist deep-freeze". Prior to 1989 Czech-Slovak political relations were a taboo subject. A particularly fraught problem was the national aspirations of the Slovaks. Moscow forbade open discussion of ethnic relations. The Soviet authorities made very skilful use, as was especially evident after 1968 ("Prague Spring"), of a *divide et impera* policy of not only exploiting but also fomenting an atmosphere of mutual suspicion in Czech-Slovak relations. But they drew the line at outright confrontation realizing it could become a hotbed of conflicts across the whole of central and south-east Europe. Moscow used Slovak nationalism against the Czechs but stopped well short of permitting a genuine transformation of Czechoslovakia towards political empowerment of the Slovaks. As a result of the 1989 "Autumn of Nations" and the implosion of the Soviet Union,

¹ The name of the socialist state was changed in April 1990 to Czech and Slovak Federative Republic with the short forms Czechoslovakia used by Czechs and Czecho-Slovakia by Slovaks.

Czech-Slovak relations came under internal rather than external control, but at the most inauspicious of junctures—against a background of snowballing mutual recriminations and grievances and the necessity of momentous constitutional decisions.²

Pattern of history? A second external factor that may have contributed to the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia was the tendency towards partition of ethnically heterogeneous states observed since the turn of the 19th and 20th century. It should be remembered that discussion of the future of a common Czech and Slovak state took place under the shadow of the war in Yugoslavia and secession by its constituent republics.³ It was accompanied by the—occasionally equally dramatic—implosion of the Soviet Union. In the West—and looking no further than the European continent—there was serious weighing of the possibility of self-determination by Flemings and Walloons, Basques and Scots. Disintegration of multinational states was becoming an axiom. A belief in the inevitability and irreversibility of such an evolution of peoples and states was certainly not conducive to thinking about saving the Czechoslovak federation.

Prospect of European integration. Another reason for the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia seems to have been the process of European integration. Paradoxically, it might be said, integration begat disintegration. But it is only an apparent paradox. Sociologists agree that in many cases these are interrelated processes. The prospect of entering the western zone of democracy and prosperity, however enthusiastically greeted by Czechs and Slovaks, was seen as a chance to further differing interests. Thanks mainly to the persuasive rhetoric of Premier Václav Klaus, the Czechs were very quickly seduced into believing that as the richer half of the federation, further advanced in socio-economic modernization and boasting a respectable democratic tradition, they were likely to gain quicker admission to “the European house” than in the company of their “poorer cousins,” the Slovaks. For their part, the Slovaks bought the rhetoric of Premier Jan Čarnogurský who, pressing for recognition of Slovakia as a separate entity under international law, stated that “the Slovaks want their own star in the

² For more on changes in post-Communist multinational states see B. Milanović, “Why Have Communist Federations Collapsed?,” *Challenge*, March–April 1994, pp. 61–64; R. Lukić, “Twilight of the Federations In East Central Europe and the Soviet Union,” *Journal of International Affairs*, 1992, no. 2, pp. 575–598.

³ P.S. Hilde, “Slovak Nationalism and the Breakup of Czechoslovakia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 1999, no. 4, p. 647.

European firmament.⁴ For the Slovaks, the European integration process was, therefore, an opportunity for self-assertion. Thus, the prospect of European integration not only manifested but also heightened the Czechs' and Slovaks' sense of distinction.

Attitude of international community. Another, though doubtless not principal, cause of the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia was the reaction of the international community to the mounting conflict of Czech-Slovak interests. It was really only then that the West took on board the fact that Czechoslovakia was the home not only of Czechs but also, among other peoples, Slovaks. Hitherto, "Czech" and "Czechoslovak" had been interchangeable terms, a usage to which the Czechs offered no objections while Slovak protests fell on deaf ears. Historians were usually reminded of Slovaks only in the context of the Slovak state established in 1939 as a satellite of the Third Reich. It might be said that the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia was watched by the international community with puzzlement. While the collapses of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were somehow, if often rather tortuously, explained and rationalized, making sense of the breakup of the Czechoslovak state was more prolonged: the country about to disappear from the European map was after all a success story. Czecho-Slovakia was perceived through the prism of the anti-Communist movement, the "velvet revolution" and an economy that was the least backward in the eastern bloc. It was remembered that in the inter-war period Czechoslovakia was an "oasis of democracy" in Eastern Europe and also one of the world's ten richest nations. In the eyes of the West it was a land of peace. So the developments in Czecho-Slovakia took many Western decision-makers by surprise. No attempt was made at that time to save the integrity of this state. That was deemed an internal issue and the general hope was that if a "divorce" did happen it would be a peaceful process. The attitude of the international community can thus be described as wait-and-see.

Internal Factors

While the above factors seem relevant to accounting for the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia, it was internal forces that were decisive. An important role was undoubtedly played by historical causes, by age-old and manifest differences between the Czechs and Slovaks in the political, socio-economic and

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 649; Z, Jičínský, "Ke ztroskání Československého federalizmu." in: K, Vodička (ed.), *Dělení Československa: Deset let poté*, Praha, 2003, p. 59.

cultural-religious dimension. As for contemporary background causes, they can be grouped under three heads. The first comprises the socio-political consciousness of the citizenry of Czecho-Slovakia at the beginning of the 1990s, the second the state's political system, and the third the specific political interests of Czech and Slovak political elites.

Czechs' and Slovaks' socio-political consciousness. The socio-political consciousness of the people of Czecho-Slovakia at the turn of the 1990s and its impact on the future of the federation was for a long time not fully appreciated. The blame for the breakup was unequivocally placed on the political elites, especially as public opinion polls and mass-scale public campaigns to preserve the unity of the state showed that the Czech and Slovak publics were opposed to the dismantling of Czecho-Slovakia. However, the problem seems more complex than might be thought.

In 1990 only 5.3% of Czechs and 9.6% of Slovaks considered separation the optimum political solution. A year later the number in favour was slightly higher—6% in the Czech Republic and 11% in Slovakia.⁵ In January 1992, when asked whether continuation of the federation was a good thing, 70% of Czechs replied “definitely” and just over 20% “on the whole;” in Slovakia the respective figures were 48% and 29%.⁶ Shortly after the July 1992 elections, as dissensions between Czech and Slovak political elites grew more acute and developed into concrete demands, only 16% of respondents in a state-wide poll favoured separation while 80% were opposed.⁷ Thenceforth, though a majority of the public were still against division of the state, a growing proportion considered it necessary. After Slovak political parties twice voted down re-election of Václav Havel as president, the Slovakian parliament proclaimed independence and negotiations between Czech and Slovak politicians failed to produce a consensus, the proportion of Czechs and Slovaks who thought breakup inevitable began to rise steadily. In October 1992 the figures were 51% in the Czech Republic and 37% in Slovakia (a month later: 50% and 40%, respectively). A noteworthy feature was the regional breakdown of opinion in the Czech Republic. In November 1992 the view that separation was inevitable

⁵ K. Vodička, “Příčiny rozdělení, shrnující analýza po deseti letech,” in: K. Vodička (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 237.

⁶ M. Bůtora, Z. Bůtorová, “Neznesitelná ľahkost rozchodu,” in K. Vodička (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 83 and 88.

⁷ K. Vodička, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

was shared by 55% of the inhabitants of Bohemia but only 40% of Moravians who are culturally closer to Slovaks.⁸ It is also interesting to find that the most fervent opponents of division were Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians who believed that a federal Czechoslovakia guaranteed them more rights than a Slovak national state. As it happens, they were later proved right.

Worth noting too are **some concerted public efforts to preserve the unity of the Czechoslovak state**. In the second half of 1991 a campaign called "For a Common State" was launched in the course of which over two million signatures were collected, albeit mostly in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, where some 200,000 people signed the petition, it tended to be seen as a bid to maintain Czech hegemony, especially as it was initiated a few months after the proclamation of an initiative called "For a Sovereign Slovakia."⁹ The aim of the "Common State" campaign was to persuade the federal parliament to hold a referendum on the future of the country. An original idea was the "light-bulb referendum": on 24 November 1991 at 7.40 pm all in favour of saving Czecho-Slovakia were asked to switch on two 100-watt bulbs in their homes. It was later estimated that in the Czech Republic 2.7 million households (8.1 million citizens, or 80% of the total) and in Slovakia 450,000 households (1.35 million, 37%) thus voted for the continued existence of Czecho-Slovakia.¹⁰

It might be thought that the poll findings and the scale of the public efforts in support of the continuation of Czecho-Slovakia belie the idea that the chief cause of the breakup was the Czechs' and Slovaks' socio-political consciousness. And if we were to ignore certain crucial facts, this would be true. Besides, the majority of commentators are content to counterpose political elites bent on separation to the mass of society which rejected such a policy.

So what are the factors suggesting a different assessment of why the public behaved the way it did? First and foremost, there is both people's characteristic conservatism and distaste for upheavals in the social and political landscape. The so-called national character of both Czechs and Slovaks seems almost totally lacking in elements of revolutionary thinking. Yet deciding to break up a state is, surely, nothing short of revolution! Thus, a bigger part might have been played

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁹ Z. Jičínský, *op. cit.*, p. 63; J. Rychlík, "Průběh rozpadu Československa v letech 1989-92," in: K. Vodička (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 300.

¹⁰ O. Ulč, "Czechoslovakia's Velvet Divorce," *East European Quarterly*, 1996, no. 3, p. 244.

by dislike of any radical change and fear of the unknown rather than attachment to a common state.

Another point is what the Czechs and Slovaks understood by "common state." For it turns out that this term was differently interpreted in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia. For the Czechs, it meant a federation in which the central authorities played a significant role in the country's political system. De facto what they had in mind was a unitary state. By contrast, the Slovaks thought in terms of a confederation, a loose union of two sovereign states.¹¹ The confederative model, in 1992 favoured by 30% of Slovaks, had only 3% support in the Czech Republic, while 38% of Czechs and only 14% of Slovaks opted for a "state with a single government."¹² In other words, while a majority was, professedly, in favour of a "common state," what they actually wanted was different kinds of state and the demands of the Czech and Slovak camps were effectively irreconcilable. The situation was complicated by the fact that a portion of the respondents did not grasp the implications of a particular option. For example, a fifth of the Slovak respondents who said they favoured a unitary state model also said that Slovakia should have its own army. And vice versa: an almost equal proportion of those in favour of an independent Slovakia were opposed to a formation of separate military forces.¹³

A theory currently put forward by sociologists and political scientists is that one of the principal causes of the breakup was the absence of a Czechoslovak society. Two "parallel societies," they argue, functioned alongside one another, each with its own increasingly distinct political culture. Accordingly, the causes of the breakup are to be sought in the disappearance or lack of a sense of a "Czechoslovak we" manifested in a shared historic memory, a "commonality of memories and hopes,"¹⁴ but also belief in a common future. According to Petr Pithart, the totalitarian regime signified not only a window closed to the world but also "broken mirrors" inside. Serious debate about national concerns was forbidden. People never jointly discussed their experiences and understanding of the past, their plans for the future, their faults and virtues. Furthermore, a shared

¹¹ J. Rychlík, "Průběh rozpadu ...", p. 295.

¹² K. Vodička, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

¹³ P.S. Hilde, *op. cit.*, p. 658.

¹⁴ M. Bútorá, Z. Bútorová, *op. cit.*, p. 76; J. Rychlík, "Slovensko-české vztahy z české perspektivy", in: S. Kučerová (et al.), *Idea Československa a střední Evropa*, Brno, 1994, pp. 115-117.

state and close similarity of language confirmed them in a false belief that Czechs and Slovaks were well acquainted and already knew everything that needed to be known about one another. Serious matters were something which under the Communist regime you could only either lie or keep silent about. Both courses proved lethal for the future of the common state.¹⁵ For the Slovaks, Czechoslovakia stood for oppression, attempted appropriation of the Slovak people and Slovak culture, and the hegemony of Prague. For the Czechs, who—in contrast to the Slovaks—identified strongly with the Czechoslovak state, it meant a state extending beyond historical borders. They did not think of it as a state of two equal partners, Czechs and Slovaks.

A 1992 poll found that two-thirds of Slovaks were dissatisfied with the changes that followed the “velvet revolution.” Almost the same proportion of respondents in the Czech Republic was of the opposite view. Czechs were also more optimistic than Slovaks about the course of future political developments (70% to 50%). In many ways Czech and Slovak apprehensions also differed. Economic collapse was feared by 70% of Slovaks and 46% of Czechs, excessive Jewish influence by, respectively, 54% and 16% and civil war in the absence of consensus on constitutional reform by 41% and 24%.¹⁶

A key issue dividing Czechs and Slovaks was their view of the free market and democracy. On the latter point this was to some extent connected with attitudes to the Communist past. Thus, in the early 1990s well over twice as many Czechs as Slovaks approved of market reforms and privatization. One Czech in two, but only one Slovak in five, thought that privatization would be beneficial. The view that a market economy was crucial to the country’s development was in 1992 fully endorsed by 60% of Czechs but only 30% of Slovaks.¹⁷ The Czechs tended to favour a liberal economic model while the Slovaks preferred one with a large measure of state interventionism. One of the reasons for these differences was that transition created greater hardship and problems for the Slovaks than for the Czechs. If only for structural reasons, Slovakia’s economy was less amenable to reforms. One example was the arms industry, a sector which had been built up mainly in Slovakia and which almost

¹⁵ P. Pithart, “Paradoxy rozchodu: filozofická a mravní hlediska a evropské paralely,” in: K. Vodička (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 200; B. Blažek, “Czego ci Słowacy właściwie chcą?,” *Obóz*, 1990, no. 19, p. 82.

¹⁶ K. Vodička, *op. cit.*, pp. 211–213.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–220.

overnight lost its export markets. It also has to be borne in mind that the centrally planned economy period was differently remembered in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic.

Another significant difference between Czechs and Slovaks was attitudes to Communist times. Whereas in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the demise of Slovak statehood Communism had decidedly negative associations for Slovaks, towards the end of the century the situation was markedly different. After the war Communism was equated in Slovakia with the fall of a Slovak state and re-establishment of enforced political unity with the Czech Lands. It should not be forgotten that in the post-war election the Communist Party won in the Czech part of the country but lost in Slovakia where the Communists were a minority party and did not have as strong a base as in the Czech Lands. (That, in turn, was the implication of the Munich events and the days of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.) The Communist takeover in Slovakia was therefore a far bigger shock for the Slovaks than the Czechs. Subsequently, a belief took root among the Slovak people that Communism had been imposed on them by the Czechs.¹⁸ Slovak anti-Communism, cooled after the 1968 intervention by Warsaw Pact forces, resulted in a Slovak, Gustáv Husák,¹⁹ and a Ruthenian, Vasil Bilak, assuming the reins of party rule.

The 1970s in Slovakia are associated with accelerated economic development. This was connected with numerous industrial projects. In that period the standard of living in Slovakia improved significantly and perceptibly. Meanwhile, in the Czech Lands Communism began to be perceived through the prism of a "Slovak invasion" of the federal administration and socio-economic stagnation. Today, many Slovaks equate Communism with a successful exercise in modernization rather than an oppressive regime. For Czechs, Communism means a hiatus in development and regression.²⁰ In a 1990 survey of attitudes to Communism a sense of "shame and chagrin" was declared by 58% of respondents in the Czech Republic and only 39% in Slovakia.²¹ Also, it should be remembered that the

¹⁸ M. Kusý, "Fenomen slowacki," in: R. Chmel (ed.), *Kwestia slowacka w XX wieku*, Gliwice, 2002, p. 513.

¹⁹ General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1969–1987, President of Czechoslovakia, 1975–1989.

²⁰ M. Bútorá, Z. Bútorová, *op. cit.*, p. 74; A. Wolff-Powęska, *Oswojona rewolucja, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w procesie demokratyzacji*, Poznań, 1998, p. 241.

²¹ M. Bútorá, Z. Bútorová, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

brunt of the political crackdown, which followed the "Prague Spring," was borne to an overwhelmingly greater degree by Czechs than Slovaks. The anti-Communist movement in the 1970s and 1980s was decidedly stronger and more vibrant in the Czech Lands than in Slovakia. Moreover, in the former it was more of a civic movement, while in Slovakia it was mostly driven by religious or national sentiment. Consequently, there prevails a belief, only partially correct, that the "velvet revolution"—and, for that matter, Communism (of all the paradoxes of history!) was brought to Bratislava from Prague.²²

Among the structural conditions that might account for the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia two factors seem particularly relevant. First, the existence of two distinct political cultures rooted in two different anti-Communist movements and two party systems. Second, a federal system which effectively paralyzed attempts at reform.

The emergence of two political cultures and two party systems in Czechoslovakia after the "velvet revolution" was no accident. While the Czech anti-Communist movement, which took on institutional attributes in the 1970s, was based on a secular "parallel polis" and a belief in civic values and human rights, in Slovakia it was seen in "God's commune" terms with religious faith and national values serving as the weapon in the fight against Communism. To define this difference many political scientists employ a singular antinomy: "civic principle" (Czech Republic) versus "national principle" (Slovakia). Of the 1000-plus signatories of Charter '77 only four were Slovaks. The Slovak anti-Communist movement was decidedly weaker than the Czech. The two opposition movements, one Czech, one Slovak, existed alongside one another and co-operated but never merged. Consequently, what we saw in November 1989 was an eruption of two parallel velvet revolutions, one in Bratislava, the other in Prague. The first began on 16 November, the second, better known in the world at large, the day after. A few days later two organizations were formed, Public Against Violence (*Verejnost' proti násiliu*, VPN)²³ in Slovakia and its counterpart Civic Forum (*Občanské fórum*, OF) in Prague.²⁴ Local Civic Forum

²² *Ibid.* See also J. K. Glenn, "Competing Challengers and Contested Outcomes to State Breakdown: The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia," *Social Forces*, September 1999, pp. 187–211.

²³ Preceded two days earlier by a Hungarian minority organization, Hungarian Civic Initiative (Mad'arská občanská iniciatíva).

²⁴ For more on the duality of the Czechoslovak anti-Communist movement, see J. K. Glenn, *op. cit.*, pp. 187–211.

organizations were also set up in Slovakia which might have testified to the supranational character of this socio-political formation. But the VPN and OF leaderships quickly agreed on transformation of these organizations into VPN branches. By the same token, any idea of forming a single Czechoslovak pro-democracy movement was stillborn. Interesting, too, are the differences in the behaviour of the Communist elites at the onset of the 1989 events. The Czech Communists either withdrew from active politics, seeing no place for themselves in the new reality, soldiered on unreconstructed (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, KSČM) or joined the social democratic camp (Czech Social Democratic Party, ČSSD). In the same period, the Slovak Communists happily adopted nationalist rhetoric.²⁵ Parties with a clear-cut social democratic complexion do not really exist in Slovakia, while the Communist Party (KSS) commands scant political support (a few percent). This “nationalization” of the Communist elites makes Slovakia resemble the states which emerged from the breakup of the USSR, as well as Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia.

Under the conditions of a democratic state the ideological differences between the Czech and Slovak anti-Communist elites were shared by both nations. This is evidenced by election results. Of decisive significance were the parliamentary elections held in June 1992. In the Czech Republic the winner was the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) in alliance with the Christian Democratic Party (KDS) which campaigned under the slogan “either *funkční federace* [“viable federation”] (essentially a unitary state with elements of federation) or separation”; in Slovakia by Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) whose manifesto explicitly called for: “sovereignty and recognition of Slovakia as a separate subject of international law.” Each side won almost 34% of the vote. Aside from differing visions of the state they also disagreed in the ideological dimension. The ODS was committed to liberal and civic values and opted for a free market economy, while the HZDS stood for national values and did not conceal its hostility to market reforms. A sizeable portion of ODS voters were business people and students, while its support among workers and farmers was conspicuously small. With the HZDS it was the other way round.²⁶

²⁵ J. Mlynárik, *História česko-slovenských vtahov*, in: K. Vodička (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²⁶ K. Vodička, *op. cit.*, p. 223 It is also worth noting that, typically, politicians who were popular in Slovakia were disliked in the Czech Lands and vice versa (with one exception: President Havel). See M. Bútorá, Z. Bútorová, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

However, the constitutional law of the Czechoslovak state, especially a so-called “no preponderation” clause, provided that if the two parties failed to form a common government new elections had to be called. Forming a coalition with smaller parties was not really possible since the liberal ODS would need to court the support of Slovak socialists, Communists and nationalists, and the HZDS to strike a deal with the Czech Communists and radical ultra-right Republicans. When, understandably, consensus proved unattainable, a third option was chosen: dissolution of the federation.

A fundamental significance in the structural background of the breakup of the state should be attributed to a provision incorporated in the constitution after the “Prague Spring” to act as a safeguard against domination by a numerical majority. The Federal Assembly consisted of two chambers, the Chamber of the People (*Sněmovna lidu*, SL) composed of 200 and, post 1990, 150 deputies, elected state-wide, and the Chamber of the Nations (*Sněmovna národů*, SN) with 150 members, half each from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Ordinary legislation required a simple majority of the SN deputies from Czech constituencies and a majority of the deputies elected in Slovakia. A qualified majority of three-fifths in each section of the Chamber of the Nations was required for election of the president, declaration of war and any amendment to the constitution. This system of separate voting by Czech and Slovak deputies was known as the “no preponderation” clause. Under a Communist regime and limited democracy it did not have a paralysing effect on the state; however, it became a serious problem in the conditions of nascent democracy and a relatively immature political culture. In effect, the provision meant that 31 Czech or Slovak deputies (i.e. one tenth of all members of the federal assembly) could block the lawmaking process (changes in the constitution). Naturally, apart from the no-preponderation clause there was a number of other institutions which made for cumbersome governance in a democratic environment. The design of the political system, universally contested, was in itself, given the impossibility of forming a common vision of the future state, a serious problem. This resulted in the transfer of an increasing number of responsibilities and powers to the parliaments of the republics, which marginalized the role of the federal level.

Interests of political elites. The most popular theory among political scientists is that the breakup of Czecho-Slovakia was primarily due to the conflicting interests of Czech and Slovak political elites. It is a plausible explanation though the actual weight of this factor is debatable. There is a general assumption that it was Slovak nationalism and Czech technocratism and

excessive preoccupation with economics that were to blame. Much is made of the egocentrism and parochial nature of Czechoslovak politics. These causes were personified by Vladimír Mečiar and Václav Klaus, the victors of the 1992 elections and architects of the division of Czecho-Slovakia. The politicians, both Czech and Slovak, who sought to save the common state, most notably Václav Havel, Petr Pithart and Vlado Čech, are consigned to supporting roles.

Both then and since, debate in the Czech Republic and Slovakia about the role of the political elites in the dismantling of the state has highlighted a certain crucial fact, namely the emergence, as noted earlier, of two different elites in each half of the country in the early 1990s. The basic determinant of the actions of Czech politicians was a civic model of the nation, close to the west-European tradition and modern constitutional models. Reference to and accentuation of ethnic differences were avoided. The focus of the political agenda was to be socio-economic modernization of the state. By contrast, in Slovakia appeals to national values were the rule. The behaviour and rhetoric of Slovak politicians was firmly rooted in the 19th-century tradition of the national-liberation movement. For it was only then that the Slovaks got the opportunity to articulate their national aspirations. These two guiding principles—the civic and the national—were, objectively speaking, hard, if not impossible, to reconcile. Whatever the other differences, none of the mainstream political parties, apart from the Slovak National Party (SNS), demanded division of the state.

An observer of the Czech-Slovak negotiations on reform of the state could be forgiven for feeling that patient pursuit of consensus, open-mindedness and willingness to offer real, as opposed to token, concessions were for the most part totally alien to the Czech and Slovak politicians. The highly charged tenor and equivocality of the bargaining, especially on the Slovak side, resulted in repeated breakdowns of the talks. The fundamental issue dividing the two sides was the constitutional structure of the state. The Czechs insisted on federalism, albeit in a highly centralized form, while the Slovaks opted for a confederative model. The Czechs thought that reform of the state should be “top-down”—through adoption of the requisite legislation in the federal parliament—while the Slovaks wanted it to proceed “from the bottom up”—by way of international agreements between the national parliaments. The Czechs employed a technocratic rhetoric to support their case, while the Slovaks relied on the symbolic sphere. One example was the “war of the hyphen” launched in January 1990 over the adoption of a new name for the state and its coat of arms. The Czechs proposed a return to the pre-war name *Československá republika* and a

coat of arms depicting the Bohemian lion, the Slovakian double cross and the Moravian eagle. The Slovaks rejected this idea and counter-proposed *Federácia Česko-Slovensko* (to underline the autonomous status of the Slovak nation) and a coat of arms comprising the Bohemian lion and Slovakian double cross (no Moravian eagle). This proposal was perceived in the Czech Lands as an assertion of "Slovak nationalism." For the Czechs, the hyphen had negative connotations associated with the post-Munich period when it was inserted in the name of the Second Republic (1938–1939).²⁷ The name and coat of arms issues aroused considerable public interest. A number of other names were suggested, none of which gained the acceptance of both sides. It was not till 20 April 1990 that the issue was resolved when the federal parliament approved a new compromise name, *Česká a Slovenská Federatívni/Federatívna Republika*. The coat of arms was to consist of four parts (quarters): the Bohemian lion in the first and third quarter and the Slovak double cross in the second and third. The motto of the kings of Bohemia *Pravda vítězí* ("Truth prevails") was replaced with the neutral Latin version *Veritas vincit*.

The list of differences between Czech and Slovaks elites could be greatly extended but these alone illustrate the gulf that had opened up between the Czech and Slovak agendas. It is also interesting that, despite all the incompatible proposals, none of the negotiators was for a long time willing to call a spade a spade and announce that separation was inevitable. They feared the odium that would be heaped on those responsible for such a decision given the level of public support for the continuation of the state shown by the polls. Particularly devious was the behaviour of Slovakia's Premier Vladimir Mečiar who, while casting himself in public as champion of a "common state," kept presenting the Czechs with unacceptable demands.

Of decisive significance for the future of the state were the negotiations which began in mid-1992 between Václav Klaus and Vladimir Mečiar, the respective premiers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. It is worth noting that neither of these leaders hailed from the ranks of former dissidents who were inclined towards agreement and compromise. Klaus was not at heart bent on dismantling the federation but as a pragmatist he understood or rather believed that it was inevitable. As he saw it, the price which would have to be paid for the continued existence of the state was a slowdown in economic reforms and it was

²⁷ P.S. Hilde, *op. cit.*, p. 654.

definitely not one that he was prepared to accept. Having concluded that attempts to save the integrity of the state were doomed, he insisted on going ahead with “divorce proceedings” as quickly and in as orderly a fashion as possible. He readily stigmatised the Czech advocates of patient negotiations—the opposition and intellectuals—as “leftists.” He rejected the idea of holding a referendum on this issue; in the federal parliament his ODS voted with the HZDS against setting up a commission to examine the economic and political consequences of separation. A parliamentary debate on the proposed arrangements for the division never took place. Klaus’s position may be illustrated by a saying that became increasingly popular among the Czechs towards the end of 1992: “If that’s what the Slovaks want, good riddance!”²⁸

As for Vladimír Mečiar, he favoured a loose confederative model which on the one hand would enable political autonomy and on the other guarantee some form of economic support from Prague. A Czech politician described this—rather bizarre—idea as “political sovereignty with Czech insurance.”²⁹ In public Mečiar insisted that all he wanted was reform of the federation, not separation, but his decisions went in the opposite direction. His preference for Slovak sovereignty is evidenced by his successful blocking of the re-election as president of Václav Havel who enjoyed great popularity in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia and was also a figure integrating the two peoples. Moreover, Mečiar’s HZDS initiated the process which culminated in the Slovakian parliament approving a Declaration of Independence and also demanded adoption of a Slovakian constitution with primacy over the federal constitution. From the outset Mečiar had pressed for “recognition of Slovakia as a separate subject of international law” which was feasible in the framework of a confederation or a wholly independent state. The evolution of his views on the future of Czecho-Slovakia is interesting. Before he was ousted from the premiership of Slovakia in spring 1991, Mečiar took a measured line and unambiguously supported preservation of the federation though some of his demands were hard to reconcile with a federal structure. However, once in opposition, his position grew more radical and his HZDS began openly demanding establishment of a confederation.

²⁸ Z. Jičínský, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁹ K. Vodička, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

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Czecho-Slovakia became history on 31 December 1992.³⁰ Formally, its fate was sealed by just three deputies whose votes produced the required majority (183/300) in the federal parliament, though, there was and still is no lack of voices questioning the validity of this decision (the assembly was not authorized to take such a step). In view of the unfavourable outcome of the ballot Klaus and Mečiar were determined to force through the “divorce” in the national parliaments which were unlikely to present any major problems. At the same time, the idea of a national referendum was rejected on the grounds that separation had been de facto decided by the 1992 elections. Earlier, there came a division of national assets, preparation of a raft of international agreements regulating mutual relations and the securing of international recognition of the two republics.

“The Czechoslovak Republic,” Petr Pithart observed, “which had a philosophic beginning [a reference to Thomas G. Masaryk, philosopher and founder of the state] is ending its life in a wholly unphilosophic fashion ... The buzzword, especially in vogue with the political leaders who have divided the state, is ‘pragmatic’.”³¹ This “unphilosophic” demise of the Czechoslovak state continues to be a subject of public debate in both countries. Years on, the conclusions vary.

³⁰ O. Ulč, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

³¹ P. Pithart, *op. cit.*, p. 184.