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**The Rise and Fall of Illiberal Democracy in Slovakia:
1989-1998**
An Analysis of Transformation in a Post-Communist Society

by

Samuel Abrahám

**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Political Science
Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada
April 2000
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acceptance of the thesis,

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submitted by

Samuel Abrahám, B.A., M.A.

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Chair, Department of Political Science

Thesis Supervisor
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April, 2001**

Abstract:

The fall of the Communist regimes remains one of the most important positive developments of the end of the 20th Century. However, the following post-communist transformation, besides general euphoria, also brought along the sobering effect of a Communist legacy that influenced the attitudes and behaviour of individuals in the societies beset by political, social and economic dislocation. It is thus a remarkable story that one post-communist society, Slovakia, first became what we will call an “illiberal democracy” and then managed through its own internal energy and resources to return to the course of those post-communist societies heading towards building civil society and liberal democracy.

The focus of this thesis is to explore the historical background and the period between 1989, when the Communist regime disintegrated in Czechoslovakia, and 1998, when, within an already independent Slovakia, pro-democratic forces achieved electoral victory. It is also a general study concerned with under what conditions an “illiberal democracy” can transform itself into a liberal democracy. The main problem to tackle is that neither history, political culture nor dynamics of political events during the transformation in Slovakia provide sufficient explanation for the direction of political events. The analysis will show that the rise and fall of “illiberal democracy” in Slovakia was conditioned by the internal dynamics of a society in transition and influenced by historical, internal and external, contingent factors.

The legitimacy of political leaders as the independent variable will serve as an analytical tool that will help to explain why illiberal democracy was first established and then defeated in 1998. Although the politicians themselves influenced the nature of political development after 1989, their action was restricted by the nature of the society they governed. I will argue that the significance of this nine-year period lies in the fact that, at its end, Slovak society experienced a qualitative shift towards building a civil society unprecedented in its modern history.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Acronyms of Political Parties in Slovakia:

- AWS** – Association of Workers of Slovakia
(Združenie robotníkov na Slovensku – ZRS)
- CDM** – Christian Democratic Movement
(Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie – KDH)
- DU** – Democratic Union (Demokratická únia – DÚ)
- DP** – Democratic Party (Demokratická strana – DS)
- HC** – Hungarian Coalition (Maďarská koalícia – MK)
- KSČ/KSS** – Komunistická strana Československa/Slovenka – Communist Party of Czechoslovakia/Slovakia – in Slovakia it was transformed in 1990 into Party of Democratic Left – SDL'
- MDS** – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
(Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko – HZDS)
- PAV** – Public Against Violence (Verejnost' proti násiliu – VPN)
- PCU** – Party of Civil Understanding
(Strana občianskeho porozumenia – SOP)
- PDL** – Party of the Democratic Left (Strana demokratickej ľavice – SDL')
- SDC** – Slovak Democratic Coalition
(Slovenská demokratická koalícia – SDK)
- SNP** – Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana – SNS)

Various Acronyms:

- ŠtB** – Štátna bezpečnosť (State Security – secret police during the Communist era in Czechoslovakia)
- SNP** – Slovenské národné povstanie (Slovak National Uprising of 1944)
- NR SR** – Národná rada Slovenskej Republiky (National Council of the Slovak Republic -- Slovak Parliament)

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Introduction

Slovakia, one of the successor states that emerged after the split of Czechoslovakia in January 1993, has attracted little or no attention in the Western media. Even the sparse reports that have appeared in the media generally have been quite negative. After the fall of Communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, Slovakia as a part of the Czechoslovak federation was perceived as an example of successful transformation. Yet the outburst of nationalism in Slovakia and the wrangle over the federal arrangement slowed down, and to some extent, paralyzed the administration of the federation. To the astonishment of many outside observers, the stability of post-communist Czechoslovakia gave way to the fragmentary instability of a divided and strained country. Whereas the Czech Republic continued even after the break-up to be heralded as the most successful post-communist country, Slovakia, smaller and industrially less developed, seemed not only more vulnerable but also was heading for a populist - nationalist regime with no perceptible direction. Indeed, the disparity between the two countries after 1993 grew rapidly in terms of political and economic development. So, within a few years after this division Slovakia plunged into the category of post-communist countries that backtracked from democratic principles and economic reforms, the two prerequisites necessary to be in the first category of countries applying to join either NATO or the European Union. Slovakia became an exemplary case of the type of regime that some western observers categorize as "illiberal democracy". Yet, within five years into Slovakia's independence there came a major change. And it is the background and context of this change that I will attempt to explain and analyze in the following chapters.

The October 1998 general election in Slovakia seemed to represent a turning point in its post-communist transformation, and I will argue that it was a watershed in modern Slovak history. Countries such as Belarus or Yugoslavia, whose development in the early 1990s resembled Slovakia's checkered condition, toward the end of the decade turned deeper into political and social instability, and economic crisis. In contrast, Slovakia in 1998 seemed to be turning towards strengthening civil society and democracy. To what extent this change represents a permanent landmark or a temporary development remains to be seen, and in the conclusion of this work we will consider several possibilities.

In this work, we will explore the events that constitute the background of the period of transformation, the time between 1989 when the Communist regime disintegrated peacefully in Czechoslovakia and 1998 when, within an already independent Slovakia, pro-democratic forces achieved electoral victory. We will examine this paradox: how a country, considered to have a weak democratic tradition and lacking civil society, has overwhelmingly rejected nationalism and populism. During the nine years of post-communist transformation, Slovakia has experienced a "velvet" fall of the Communist regime, short-lived general euphoria, and the subsequent rise of nationalism and populism, together with anti-Czech sentiment. The fall of communist regime was followed by the unexpected and seemingly unruffled break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993, paralleled by the emergence of a regime with certain autocratic features under the leadership of Vladimír Mečiar within an independent Slovakia. This regime for several years had broad general support despite increasing signs of widespread corruption, mismanagement and misuse of power. Also, ethnic tension, mainly with respect to the Hungarian and Roma minorities, was instigated by nationalists and

condoned by Mečiar's regime. A few years prior to the 1998 elections, however, there were signs of resurrected civil society and increasing general apprehension over blatant abuse of power and widespread embezzlement of state property. Also, besides opposition politicians, two institutions relatively independent of government's power – the office of the President and the Constitutional Court – were in the forefront of resistance against Mečiar's abuse of the rule of law. Added to this, independent newspapers, radio and television stations, had a major share in providing objective information about the government's activities and thus helped to shape general public opinion and eventually to strengthen the civil society in Slovakia.

The sheer scope of changes during the 1989-1998 period is difficult to account for, and it is even more complex to explain the causes of such development. An immediate dilemma for an analyst is whether short-term, contingent factors or long-term systemic and historical components were more important and decisive for shaping this period. And if both short and long-term factors influenced developments during the transformation, how can one determine their respective proportion and impact? The significance of this nine-year period lies in the fact that, at its end, Slovak society experienced a qualitative shift towards building a civil society unprecedented in its modern history. The other key formative events of Slovak modern history: the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, the Prague Spring of 1968, or the end of the Communist regime in 1989, were initiated either by outside actors

(1918, 1968 and 1989)¹ or by a minority of Slovak citizens (1944). Only subsequently were these events appropriated and supported by a broad sector of Slovak society. In contrast, the result of the 1998 election was generated from within Slovakia, although the defeat of populism and nationalism was neither widely expected nor preordained. Slovakia could have continued further on the path initiated by the Prime Minister, Vladimír Mečiar, to an authoritarian style of politics and international isolation. Yet it did not, and the explanation is a result of the puzzling paths of Slovakia's post-communist transformation after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989.

The continuous political turmoil characterized by deep divisions – present since 1989 and deepening further after Slovakia's independence – has roots in Slovakia's historical development as a new and relatively small nation in central Europe. As one of the many nations emerging from the rubble of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, it did not have a chance to deal with its problems, to reflect on its past and to soberly assess its prospects. The two decades of democratic Czechoslovakia (1918-1939) were devoted to problems considered to be more pressing, such as building a democratic political structure as well as economic, administrative and educational infrastructure - in short, erecting a modern state politically, socially and economically. If there was little time for reflection during this period, there was even less opportunity during the subsequent fifty years when Slovakia became dominated by two anti-democratic regimes. Six years of a fascist regime (1939-1945), and then four decades of Communist regimes (1948-1989),

¹ In each of these momentous events of modern Slovak history, a prominent role was played by individual Slovak politicians or intellectuals. But conditions within Slovak society prior to these events were not conducive for major involvement by a large segment of the Slovak population. See for example Ľubomír Lipták, *Storočie dlhšie ako sto rokov*. [A century longer than one hundred years] (1999, Kaligram, Bratislava).

managed temporarily to bury, but in no way remove the unresolved problems of the past. Thus the sudden freedom arriving unexpectedly with the "Velvet revolution" in 1989 as a consequence of Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union (preceded by developments in Poland after the emergence of the Solidarity movement in 1980), had caught Slovak society both surprised and unprepared.

The defeat of Vladimír Mečiar, the pivotal figure in the whole post-communist transformation in Slovakia, during the general election in October 1998 seems to be the end of an era and the turning point of modern Slovak history. The economic and social problems following those elections seem daunting, but I will argue that it nevertheless represents, politically, a qualitative shift unique in the whole of Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of Communism. A shift within the post-communist transformation where the majority of the electorate rejected populist and antidemocratic forces is a remarkable development, considering that the position of nationalists and populists seemed secure after the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Furthermore, I will try in my analysis to argue that Mečiar's defeat, although not inevitable, was the culmination of a process, signs of which were evident prior to the elections.

The scope of this work consists of two seminal issues – one particular and hence concrete, and the other more general, hence more abstract and theoretical. First, why the events in Slovakia took such a turbulent and unexpected turn during the 1989-1998 period. Second, a more general issue deriving from Slovakia's experience, will be the construction of an hypothesis suggesting why and how, what is defined as an illiberal democracy, can be transformed into a liberal democracy. With respect to the first issue, we will study the impact of the long-term (history, political culture) and the short-term

effects of the transformation on the overall political dynamics during this period. However, the problem is that neither history, political culture nor dynamics of political events during the studied period, provide sufficient explanation for the direction of events during the transformation in Slovakia. In fact, it is impossible to determine with accuracy the interplay and influence of the two factors on the process of transformation. At best this provides answers concerning what happened, but not why the events after 1989 developed as they did. So what is needed is an explanatory, independent variable. In this respect, the issue of the legitimacy of Slovak political leaders will serve the purpose. This will help to explain why Slovakia went through such an amplitude: first succeeding with pro-democratic reforms, then becoming, for several years, an illiberal democracy, and finally, reinstating itself as a society where liberal democratic values, once again, are to be upheld.

In the first, theoretical, chapter, the effect of short- and long-term factors will be assessed and tested by several theories. The theories of post-communist transformations and the "rise of illiberal democracies" will constitute a framework within which long-term factors (history, tradition, political culture) will be confronted with short-term contingent factors (impact of social and economic transformation, ethnic tension and legitimacy of political leaders). Considered together, the theories provide a picture that helps to assess the background of the break-up of Czechoslovakia, the explosion of nationalism and Mečiar's role in Slovak politics. The legitimacy of various political leaders during the whole 1989-1998 period will be examined and will help to explain the tangled evolution of politics in Slovakia.

The second, historical, chapter will trace the historical background of Slovak-Hungarian and Slovak-Czech coexistence that formed the Slovak political culture and greatly influenced the scope, depth and direction on its post-communist transformation. In this chapter we will closely examine the first two decades of Communist rule in Slovakia culminating with the 1968 reform process, and the formation of the Czechoslovak Federation in the same year.

In the third chapter we will concentrate on the period of so-called “Normalization” period (1969-1989) together with a period starting with the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 up to the creation of an independent Slovakia in 1993. The reason for examining this period of 1969-1993 as one unit is that the immediate post-communist transformation in Slovakia was influenced mostly during the last two decades of the Communist regime when developments in Slovakia and the Czech Republic evolved differently. This chapter will assess the legacy of the Communist regime on society during the first years of transformation during the 1989-1993 period. It will focus on the political leaders who came to power immediately after the fall of the Communist regime in November 1989. Special attention will be paid to the damage done to the overall development of Slovak politics as related to the way political leaders handled the Communist regime’s secret police files. I will argue that radicalization of politics in Slovakia and one of its consequences – the break-up of Czechoslovakia – was directly linked to political chaos due to the mishandling of secret police files.

The fourth chapter is a description and an analysis of the long- and short-term causes of the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Here we will examine the role of Mečiar and the Slovak nationalists as well as those who failed to prevent precipitation of

the federation; particularly Slovak liberal politicians, the president of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, and the Czech Prime Minister, Václav Klaus.

The final two chapters will cover societal and political development in independent Slovakia between 1993-1998. During this period, Slovakia witnessed the emergence of illiberal democracy as well as establishment of a civil society. This development represents a qualitative shift within Slovak political culture previously drenched in the legacy of the Communist regime. The fifth chapter will describe and analyze Mečiar's politics of confrontation and the consequences of his gradual defiance of the rule of law. The sixth chapter will present the role of the media, NGOs and will assess the influence of Western actors in the process leading towards the October 1998 election. In this final (sixth) chapter, the position of the Hungarian minority and political opposition will be analyzed, together with an investigation as to why illiberal democracy was defeated in Slovakia.

Chapter I

Theoretical Framework

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to outline a theoretical framework suitable for analyzing events in Slovakia during the 1989-1998 period in particular, and as post-communist transformation in general. The existing theories of transformation² are at most able to explain why, from a strong pro-democratic euphoria after 1989, a populist, semi-authoritarian regime emerged in Slovakia. However, these theories fail to account why, following the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the civil society gradually re-emerged and why pro-democratic forces prevailed in Slovakia and defeated Mečiarism in the election in October 1998. The theory of illiberal democracy combined with theories of political culture, political and economic transformation will account for how and why Slovakia became an "illiberal democracy". Building on these theories a novel theoretical framework – designating legitimacy of political leaders as an independent variable – will be proposed that will allow for the classification of various post-

² The range of literature dealing with the period following the collapse of Communist regimes calls it either „transition“ or „transformation“, often invariably. The former, however, conveys notion movement from one kind of regime (Communist) to another (democratic), hence „transition to democracy“ contains a degree of inevitability and assumes that „democracy“ is not only a goal but also a necessary consequence. This is not an automatic development as we observe the developments in various post-communist countries. Thus the latter term, „transformation“ seems more accurate because it does not contain any particular outcome, rather a movement of unknown direction, and democracy is only one possibility but not necessarily the end result. Hence, throughout this work I will use this latter expression even if cited authors might use the term „transition“. For a more general definition of the term „transition“ see the definition by G. O'Donnell and P. C. Schmitter. They refer to „transition“ as „the interval between one political to another“, but the nature or type of new regime that is installed is not significant (see O'Donnell, Schmitter, Whitehead citation in bibliography, p.6).

Communist regimes and will help to understand why illiberal democracy was expelled after the 1989 general election.

Introduction

Immediately after the fall of Communist regimes in 1989, a debate started in the West regarding the future development within those societies that had renounced communism and welcomed freedom and democracy. There was no adequate theoretical framework to apply because such rapid systemic collapse and peaceful transformation was historically unprecedented. The path to be traveled after the end of Communist rule to prosperous liberal democracy was new, even inconceivable.³ As the late philosopher Ernest Gellner observed:⁴

The problem of erecting a liberal, stable and prosperous society on the ruins of a totalitarian industrial ideocracy is historically absolutely new, and no one knows the answer or answers, or indeed whether there is one.

Considering that the nature of post-communist transformation was in itself unfathomable, any guaranteed predictions, as was the case with numerous social scientists in the 1990s, were a priori questionable. Hence it has been one of the great challenges of the social sciences to comprehend and analyze a transformation of such magnitude.

Let us outline the tasks, challenges and dangers that political leaders in post-communist societies faced after the collapse of Communism. Specifically, the greatest tasks and challenges belonged to those leaders that were committed to building a market

³ See footnote 45 in this chapter citing literature dealing with this problem.

⁴ „Return of a Native“ In *The Political Quarterly* (1996) p. 12.

economy, a civil society, and establishing the rule of law. As Stephen Holmes argues in 1996: "The most difficult problem facing the countries of Eastern Europe today is the creation of a government that can pursue effective reforms while retaining public confidence and remaining democratically accountable".⁵ This represented the task to build simultaneously the rule of law, market economy and democracy, and at the same time remain popular in the upcoming elections in order to preserve continuation of the reform process. However, one legacy of communism and among the greatest challenges to overcome was that "[t]he rule of law," as John Gray argues, "which is a necessary condition both of developed market institutions and of a civil society, was the first practice of civilized life to be destroyed by the Bolshevik dictatorship; it will probably be the last to be reinvented".⁶ Yet without vibrant civil society the task of transforming the economy and still preserving political power has been, for reform-minded politicians, by and large insurmountable. Again, as John Gray warned:⁷

In the post-communist world, weak democratic regimes which sponsor projects of market reform, which in turn result in economic dislocation that violates popular standards of acceptability, will be swept away, and replaced by regimes whose commitments are neither to market reform nor to democracy.

In short, the challenges and dangers quoted above epitomize the Catch-22 condition that an analyst encountered in Slovakia where reformers in the early 1990s pushed forward economic reforms without paying more attention to their popularity among the electorate.

⁵ "Back to the Drawing Board" In *East European Constitutional Review* (Winter 1993) p.23.

⁶ John Gray: "The post-communist Societies in Transition" In John Gray: Enlightenments's Wake (1995, Routledge, London) p. 60.

As a result, they were indeed swept away, and replaced by populists and nationalists who gradually defied the rule of law and slowed down or stopped economic reforms. With these dilemmas and dangers in mind, let us outline how social scientists tried to account for, and what solutions they proposed to deal with, the quandary of post-communist transformation.

The initial euphoria and great hopes that were present in post-communist countries,⁸ have been replaced gradually by caution, and even fear whether these societies actually were ready, willing and sophisticated enough to build a viable liberal democracy.⁹ The emergence or re-emergence of nationalists and extreme right parties was perceived as widely opening a Pandora's box filled with hatred and ethnic tension that swept these societies.¹⁰ Questions were being asked: what segments, if any, of civil society had survived decades of Communist rule in post-communist societies, or whether the Communist regimes left intact some spontaneously created components of civil society? Will these societies withstand the pressure of "freedom" after hitherto experiencing enforced tutelage of the Communist regime? Will people of central Europe be able to

⁷ Ibid. p. 56.

⁸ Some observers saw in post-communist societies a great hope, a source of fresh and dynamic energy for decadent and stagnating West. See Joseph Goldfarb: After the Fall: Pursuit of Democracy in Central Europe (1992, Basic Books, New York), Michael G. Roskin: The Rebirth of East Europe Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1991) and Thomas Pangle: The Ennobling of Democracy (1992, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore) and polemical debate regarding this book and this issue on the pages of Slovak/English journal *Kritika&Kontext* 3/96.

⁹ See for example Charles Gati: „If Not Democracy, What? Leaders, Laggards, and Losers in the Postcommunist World“ In Michael Mandelbaum ed.: Postcommunism: Four Perspectives (1996, A Council on Foreign Relations Book, New York) pp. 168-188 (also see its abridged version „The Mirage of Democracy“ In *Transition* 22 March 1996).

¹⁰ Paul Hockenros: Free to Hate: The Rise of the Right in Postcommunist Eastern Europe (1993,

handle several years of economic and social hardship while expecting sudden prosperity as seen in the West?¹¹ In addition, analysts had to factor in the impact of nationalism, populism and religious fundamentalism as an unexpected "bonus" of post-communist transformation. Czech President Václav Havel reflected in 1999 on this momentous change, observing that what had surprised him most was how quickly a great number of communists appropriated nationalistic rhetoric and demagoguery and often used it as a vehicle to return to or preserve power.¹² Indeed, the nature of post-communist transformation came as a surprise both to those who lived under the Communist regimes, but also to those who followed the Communist regimes from the West. This fact in itself guaranteed that – without any comprehensive theoretical guide to be offered and used – contingency factors would play an important role.

A framework for studying the post-Communist transformation is provided, with mixed results, by the theories of transformation, be it political or economic. The initial theories on transformation – mostly based on the transformation of authoritarian to democratic regimes in Latin America and southern Europe – were useful for outlining the direction of the unprecedented systemic changes in Central Europe.¹³ However, the case of Latin-American transformations has been proved to be of only limited use in the case of post-

Routledge, New York) p.4.

¹¹ Ralph Dahrendorf: Reflection on the Revolution in Europe (1990, Times Books, New York)

¹² Václav Havel at Conference: "Ten Years After" organized by the Vienna based Institute for Human Sciences in June 1999.

¹³ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Phillipe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead eds.: Transformation from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies (1986, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, Md.)

communist countries. The two types of transformation differed in many respects.¹⁴ The sudden demise of Communist regimes where only one political party ruled¹⁵ left power vacuums that attracted a whole spectrum of inexperienced and/or ambitious politicians. They often formed a "political class" in its own service. In addition, the post-communist societies experienced simultaneous multiple transformation in politics, in economics and in national identity. This made the outcome far more unstable and unpredictable than was the case after the demise of authoritarian regimes in southern Europe and Latin America. Subsequently, social scientists tried to develop transformation theories more suitable for post-communist societies. However, even those adjusted theories had only limited analytical use. Their application was mainly to focus on contingent, immediate development but failed to deal with the long-term, historical causes that determined different developments within various countries.¹⁶ In the case of Slovakia, it at best

¹⁴ Claus Offe: Varieties of Transformation: The East European and East German Experience (1996, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.) p.31.

¹⁵ In most of the central European communist countries before 1989, small political parties were allowed to exist but they did not possess any political power. Each Constitution in these countries contained an article stating that the Communist Party is the leading force and thus any party, or for that matter any non-communist party institutions including the legislature or judiciary, were subordinated to the General Secretariat of the Communist Party.

¹⁶ The following titles provide a few important titles dealing with post-communist transformation: Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan: Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe (1996, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore); Ken Jowitt: New World Disorder: the Leninist Extinction (1992, University of California Press, Berkeley); Adam Przeworski: Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern and Central Europe and Latin America (1991, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge); Richard Rose, William Mishler and Christian Haerpfer: Democracy and Its Alternatives: Understanding Post-Communist Societies (1998, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore); The following article provides a more recent evaluation of the literature on the post-communist transformation/transition (Transitology): Steven M. Fish: „Post-communist Subversion: Social Science and Democratization in East Europe and Eurasia“, In *Slavic Review* 58:4 (Winter 1999) pp. 794-823.

succeeded in explaining the deterioration of political conditions, but failed altogether in accounting for any improvement in the political climate in 1998.

For the purpose of explaining the rise and fall of Mečiar in Slovakia, his sudden emergence in 1990 and his subsequent defeat in 1998, we must go beyond a simple account of the political turmoil during post-communist transformation. With respect to explaining the phenomenon of his emergence and popularity, the most suitable is a theory about the rise of illiberal democracies as outlined by American political analyst, Fareed Zakaria.¹⁷ His theory will provide a framework that will allow us to incorporate and link together the long-term and short-term causes that influenced developments during this period. An account of Slovak political culture that follows will show the impact of historical forces that repeatedly influenced the course of events in Slovakia after 1989. Then, the theories of political and economic transformation will account for the inadequacy of Western scholarship to analytically comprehend the post-communist transformation and account for the problems these societies had to face – the problems that were sometimes imported from outside, often innate and often contingent.

Still, the Western theories dealing with post-communist transformation help us to explain why Slovakia became an illiberal democracy, but fail to account for why it ended. In an attempt to account for this phenomenon, the last part of this chapter proposes a theoretical concept that incorporates all the long-term and short-term factors and theories. This is an attempt to provide a reason to explain why a post-communist regime becomes an illiberal democracy and, to the contrary, what conditions must pertain in order for a liberal democracy to emerge or to return.

¹⁷ F. Zakaria: "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" in *Foreign Affairs* Nov./Dec. 1997, pp. 22-43.

As was stated in the above the introductory chapter, all the long- and short-term factors are interrelated and contributed, in various degrees, to the evolution of a post-communist society. Thus, political culture, history (long-term factors) or political and economic transformation (short-term factors) are dependent variables. Finding an independent variable would allow us to analyze each period within post-communist transformation – either in Slovakia or in general – and we would be able to anticipate the developments in any post-communist society. In the case of Slovakia, though it seems valid in general, the legitimacy of political leaders juxtaposed to various long and short-term factors will serve as an independent variable. That is, analysis of legitimacy of political leaders, and the state of economic and political transformation, might indicate where a certain post-communist society is heading.

This multi-headed theoretical framework will help to account for and even explain some of the manifestations of this period in Slovakia: nationalism, populism, the break-up of Czechoslovakia and finally the resurrection of democracy and tolerance, and, thus the emergence of civil society after 1998. What follows in this chapter is an introduction of all these key theoretical concepts.

1. Rise of Illiberal democracy

Following the collapse of Communist regimes in 1989 in central Europe, ultimate political authority rested not with self-appointed communist leaders but with the voters. Thus it is not surprising that the policies and conditions in various of these post-communist countries reflect their particular history, tradition, and religion as well as

recent political developments. People are free to govern themselves, to participate in the political process and choose governments as they deem appropriate. There is no outside pressure to deny this choice. Yet, there is nothing to prevent them from choosing badly. And there is no one to blame for it but the electorate. Yet, for someone nursed on liberal-democratic doctrine, the voice of the people – of the majority – is sacred, and any blame of the electorate is not only undemocratic but sounds like sacrilege.

This paradox is the central theme of "The Rise of Illiberal Democracies", an article written by Fareed Zakaria, editor-in-chief of the influential journal, *Foreign Affairs*.¹⁸ Zakaria stresses the difference between liberalism and democracy, which may be well known to specialists in western political theory, but it has been too easily forgotten in many contemporary discussions about how best to promote and consolidate democracy. The two terms are today often taken together but in fact have distinct histories and distinct meanings. His characterization of the difference is aptly captured by his observation that, "constitutional liberalism is about the limitation of power, democracy about its accumulation and use".¹⁹ Zakaria draws this distinction in order to make a broader observation about contemporary political life. "Today", he says, "the two strands of liberal-democracy, interwoven in the western political fabric, are coming apart in the rest of the world". In a growing number of countries, "democracy is flourishing, constitutional-liberalism is not". Increasingly, Zakaria argues, free and competitive elections are producing a new breed of illiberal democracy.

¹⁸ Zakaria op.cit.

¹⁹ Zakaria op.cit. p.30

Zakaria presents a minimalist understanding of democracy as "the rule of the people." According to him, it is simply a method of selecting governments through mass plebiscite and free and fair electoral procedures, which, in the modern world, have become synonymous with competitive, multiparty elections.²⁰ Understood as a procedure, democracy offers little information and still less certainty about the character and content of the government, which emerges from this process. Reviewing the experience of the 20th century, Zakaria observes that democratic elections have frequently produced illiberal and sometimes even non-democratic leaders. Hitler and President Fujimori in Peru are but a few of the examples he mentions. Samuel Huntington, according to Zakaria, puts it succinctly:²¹

Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable *sine qua non*. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, short-sighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. Democracy is one public virtue, not the only one, and the relation of democracy to other public virtues and vices can only be understood if democracy is clearly distinguished from the other characteristics of political systems.

This reminds us that democracy alone can provide no firm guarantee of a just and decent society, nor for any definitive protection against continued tyrannical abuse. For this sort of protection, we must look not to democracy but to liberalism.

Liberalism, as Zakaria further explains, "...is not about the procedures for selecting governments, but rather government's goals. It refers to the tradition, deep in Western history, that seeks to protect an individual's autonomy and liberty against

²⁰ Zakaria *op.cit.* p.23

²¹ Cited from Samuel Huntington's The Third Wave in Zakaria's article. *op.cit.*

coercion, whatever the source -- state, church, or society".²² In the western tradition, the protection of individual political, civic, and economic liberties has engendered a specifically constitutional form of liberalism, the principle features of which are: the rule of law, equality under the law, impartial courts, checks and balances on power, and the separation of church and state. According to Zakaria, "...constitutional liberalism is about the limitation of power, democracy about its accumulation and use."²³

Zakaria's analysis offers several important lessons. First, it serves to disabuse democratic advocates, both East and West, of the simplistic assumption that all good things necessarily come with democracy. For the creation of a "civil society", an ideal to which we in central Europe have been particularly committed, democracy is the only necessary condition. It is not a sufficient one. Here, Zakaria offers a sober warning:²⁴

Democracy is only one public virtue, not the only one. ...Democracy without constitutional-liberalism is not simply inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war.

Finally, Zakaria's discussion also makes it abundantly clear that any politician who would seek to acquire power through electoral manipulation, political bribery, and constitutional sleight-of-hand is not only illiberal, but also not even a democrat.

For post-communist countries engaged in the arduous process of building democratic communities, as for those Western actors who seek to assist in this process, Zakaria's article offers a timely reminder of just how consequential the distinction between liberalism and democracy really is. However, as a theoretical concept, the

²² Zakaria op.cit. p.25

²³ Zakaria op.cit. p.30

theory of illiberal democracies is an excellent descriptive tool, though not an analytical one. It provides a unique glimpse into paradoxes of modern politics and a revelation for those who are troubled by the Lukashenkos, Mečiar, or Miloševićs of today, yet withdraw open criticism due to these politicians' source of legitimacy: the democratic majority. Thus, the limitation of the theory of illiberal democracy is that it is static in its analysis, and does not account for the dissimilar evolution within various illiberal democracies. It provides only a limited answer as to why certain countries that once were liberal democracies became illiberal ones, and gives no answer whatsoever to why and how some countries might return to liberal democratic systems. Slovakia experienced both cases – the 1992 election precipitated the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the emergence of Mečiar rule with growing authoritarian tendencies. Then, after the October 1998 election, the new government for the return of the rule of law and liberal-democratic values created plausible conditions.

In other words, Zakaria's theory does account for how an illiberal democracy emerges, but does not explain why it occurred in one country but not in another. It identifies an illiberal democracy (whenever or wherever it might be found) but does not explain the multifarious reasons for its emergence. In this respect it is similar to the concept of totalitarian regimes elaborated in the 1950s by Hannah Arendt and applied specifically to the Communist regimes examined by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski.²⁵ It exposed quite succinctly the Stalinist regime but, was unable to account

²⁴ Zakaria op.cit. p.25

²⁵ See Hannah Arendt: The Origin of Totalitarianism; Zbigniew Brzezinski and Carl J. Friedrich: Totalitarian Dictatorships and Autocracy Rev. Ed. by C.J. Friedrich, (1967, Praeger, N.Y.) and C.J. Friedrich, M. Curtis and B.C. Barber: Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views (1969, Praeger, N.Y.)

for the subsequent Khrushchev political "thaw", the bankrupt but – by comparison to Stalinism – relatively mild Brezhnev regime.²⁶ No one would apply the totalitarianism model to the regimes of Tito, Dubček, Gorbachev or even to the regime of Husák.

To summarize, the theory of illiberal democracies identifies, denotes and explains a mechanism of certain regimes but does not differentiate between different periods or different regimes. For this reason, the "illiberal democracy" theory is a more sufficient theory for describing Mečiar's regime in Slovakia than any other theory. Despite this, however, there is a need to provide an additional and broader theoretical framework in order to comprehend the complex changes within Slovakia. Complementing this framework will be the theories of political culture, political and economic transformation, and theories of legitimacy. The combination of these theories will help to account for the dynamic changes that led to the rise and fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia.

2. Political Culture and Historical Memory

The concept of political culture, first suggested by Gabriel Almond in 1955, was derived from several intellectual currents: the sociological theories of Weber and Parsons and the psycho-anthropology of Freud, Lawsell, Benedict and Inkeles, among others.²⁷ The main goal of Almond and his colleagues was to 'bridge the gap' and to find the relationship between the individual and society. As Lucian Pay observed: "the real problem of political science research [was] linking the individual to the whole system,

²⁶ In this respect, see a breakthrough study providing a more complex account of post-stalinist Soviet Union. H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths eds.: Interest groups in Soviet Politics (1971, Princeton, N.J.).

²⁷ Newsletter on Comparative Studies of Communism 5:3 (May, 1972) p.3.

and political culture [seemed] especially useful in making this linkage".²⁸ Political culture entails the exploration of the hidden undercurrents of the subjective perceptions of the general population rather than the more apparent visible patterns of overt behavior. In Sydney Verba's words, "[Political culture] provides the subjective orientation to politics", and, which is most important, "it refers not to what is happening in the world of politics, but to what people believe about these happenings".²⁹

The political culture model is a modern tool of political analysis developed in sociology as a reaction to the strictly instrumental behavioralism that dominated political science in the 1960s. It purported that deeply held values and human prejudices, linked together, influence and determine an individual's social behavior and attitudes towards politics. It was a reaction to a preconceived assumption - especially by American social scientists - that human beings determine their behavior and attitudes strictly through rational choices. With the refinement of the techniques of opinion polling in the West, particularly in English-speaking countries, social scientists could test their theories as to what extent intuition and its attendant plethora of misconceptions could have an effect on the perception of social and political events in a society. The result was surprising: despite easy access to information promoting liberal-democratic values, a human being, besides being bound to make false judgements, is also susceptible to misinterpret political events.

The most useful focus of political culture theory for the study of former Communist regimes is its account of continuity and change within a society after a major

²⁸ ibid. p.9.

political change. This allows us to concentrate on the degree of harmony and dissonance between the political culture and the political system. This was useful for the analysis of Communist societies where the actual state of political culture differed from the official "propaganda" installed by the decision-makers of these regimes. A paradoxical situation occurred after the fall of Communist regimes with respect to political culture. As the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have proceeded to build democratic systems, the study of political culture has begun its new phase where the impact of four decades of Communist regimes has claimed its due. The impact of communist domination influenced people's underlying subjective values and had an influence on some of their attitudes and beliefs about politics, morality and history. This "inheritance" of the perspective or "mind-set" is the "continuity factor" of political culture. This is one of the gravest legacies of Communist rule. Furthermore, it has had long-lasting and unexpected consequences for the post-communist historical memory. It has done much to destroy it.

Recounting the history of a nation by historians and the perception of that history among the citizens, are two distinct yet related domains. The former consists of selecting and interpreting historical facts while the latter is a sociological mapping of current political culture through surveying views of the same historical events. Not surprisingly, the historical memory of a nation or the views held about the past depends on the accuracy and quality of available historical research. As E.H. Carr cautions, selection and interpretation of certain facts of history depends on the disposition and honesty of the interpreter.³⁰ An account of a nation's past, if politicized, is thus misleading and biased.

²⁹ Lucian W. Pye and S. Verba eds.: Political Culture and Political Development (1965, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., p.513).

³⁰ E.H. Carr: What is History? (1961, Macmillan, London) pp. 23 and 36.

A lack of reliable and accurate historical texts has been yet another communist legacy – a thriving field in which nationalists and populists can misinterpret and appropriate history as they wish.

It is evident that the fall of a political structure does not coincide with a change of political culture within a nation. There is a time lag, which differs from society to society, wherever a democratic structure is supplanted by democratic political culture. The period in between is the period of political, social and private turmoil that has been the understandable yet undesirable price for the demise of the Communist regime. The duration of this time lag depends on the state of political culture of a particular society. Historiography in the Communist countries, in order to legitimize its existence and to control people's views was especially prone to distorting the interpretation of the past. Countless people's names and deeds were erased from officially sanctioned materials. In Slovakia during this period, as elsewhere in Communist Europe, the study of modern history was deformed and for decades sociological and political research was repressed. No doubt, the result of the Communist legacy on Slovak political culture remains immense.³¹

The different development and speed of change after the fall of Communism in various former Soviet-bloc countries indicated the distinct state of political culture. In fact, the different Czech and Slovak political culture can serve as an explanation for the unexpected tension and eventual break-up of Czechoslovakia. Despite the fact that Czechs and Slovaks constituted one state for most of the twentieth century and provided

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See excellent studies of the political culture of Communist countries by A. Brown and J. Gray eds.: Political Culture and Political Change in Communist states (1979, Holmes and Meier Publ.,

the linguistic and cultural affinity of the two nations, there had been a long uncommon historical experience before 1918. Furthermore, the different unfolding of Czech and Slovak societies during the Communist period, and especially during the so-called Normalization period (1969-1989), marked the distinct condition of the two societies on the eve of the fall of the Communist regime in November 1989.³² This long-term, historical factor, the topic of the next chapter, is important for understanding the unfolding of events in Slovakia during the period 1989-1998.

Moreover, there is still another factor related to the political culture of post-communist countries concerning the general perception of historical events. Bluntly stated, the Communist power wanted political control, it used its propaganda to convince the population of the superiority of its historical position and the inevitability of its eventual victory over the western democratic system. So, for this purpose, it altered textbooks, reinterpreted history and banned and censored anything that contradicted its propaganda. It aimed to erase the historical memory of its citizens in order to engrave its own "history" on the minds of its citizens. Czech novelist Milan Kundera lamented in the late 1970s that the "the greatest injustice [of the Communist regime] is not violence but forgetting" and that it was the aim of the Husák regime to destroy the nation's history, to make the nation "forget what it is and what it was".³³

However, as the study of political culture shows, the Communists were not successful in imposing their worldview on the population, yet the damage to national

N.Y.) and A. Brown ed.: Political Culture and Communist Studies (1985, M.E. Sharp, Inc., Armonk, N.Y.).

³²

See Chapters II and III regarding the historical development of political culture in Slovakia.

consciousness was enormous. Its effort led more to general ignorance and self-repression of values than to ideological fanaticism – a bleak prospect, nevertheless. The result was an undermining of the traditional moral and ethical system that upholds human virtues so needed in confrontation with an oppressive Communist regime. H. Gordon Skilling, a prominent political scientist who for decades has studied Czech and Slovak history and politics, wrote pessimistically in the early 1980s about the state of the two nations' political culture. The deep democratic values that epitomized these two nations' political culture in the past had been withering away. Skilling wrote with sorrow in 1984, not seeing any response among the wide population to the efforts of the dissidents or to the changes taking place in Poland, Hungary and in the USSR, that "[o]ne may question whether values which are not acted on, for whatever reason, are really deeply held..."³⁴ Not surprisingly, one of the main efforts of the dissidents in Czechoslovakia was the revival of historical memory. Milan Šimečka, a prominent Czechoslovak dissident, wrote that dissidents' "independent cultural activities had the spontaneous aim of saving Czech and Slovak culture from degeneration, to save language from mindless phrases and memory from forgetting".³⁵ Why was this "forgetting" of history so important in the aftermath of the collapse of the Communist regimes? The answer is simple: an absence of any knowledge of or a distorted view of history make people less responsible, and thus

³³ Milan Kundera: The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1983, Harmondsworth, London) p.1 and p.159.

³⁴ Skilling, H.G.: „Czechoslovak Political Culture: Pluralism in an International Context“ In A. Brown ed.: Political Culture and Communist Studies (1994, M.E. Sharpe, New York) p. 123.

³⁵ Šimečka's text is one of the responses to a questionnaire sent by Skilling to prominent dissidents in Czechoslovakia. In H. Gordon Skilling: „Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry“ In *Social Research*, 55:1-2 (Spring/Summer 1988) p. 225.

more susceptible to various sirens of populism and nationalism with their morass of stereotypes and myths. A common historical memory among the population that could have served as a defense against the populist temptation was distorted or erased. The Communist legacy in the political culture of Slovakia has been a program of distorted psychic amputation and transplantation. This extreme world of 'black and white' is the truth that, to some extent, stands for all post-Communist societies, including even the embrace of many of the intellectual and political elite.

Every totalitarian regime has tried to establish its own values and myths. To accomplish this, a nation's history must be erased, creating a *tabula rasa* on which a new history can be etched. But we are fortunate, the Orwellian state is harder to build than to imagine. Basic human values and moral standards are embedded deeper in the political culture than Communist ideologues might have hoped. The official history enforced by the Communist regimes in large part was rejected by most of the population; instead, popular beliefs were a sort of inverse reaction to the official line: what was called "black" by the Communists was understood as "white"; anyone who was praised by the regime was considered a crook. This device was invented by the ingenious human mind as a defense against the sheer stupidity and callousness of the Communist regime. However, just as the opposite of a lie does not equal the truth, the failure to create a "Socialist Man" did not result in an accurate interpretation of history among the population.³⁶ Tragically, this distorted historical memory resulted in simplistic views of the past and in

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Archie Brown, writing in 1985 about Communist regimes, argues "...that in so far as there was change in the dominant political culture, it was at times in a quite different direction from that favored and emphasized in the official political culture". A. Brown ed.: Political Culture and Communist Studies (1985, M.E. Sharpe, New York; p.164).

stereotyping that veiled the nation's historical experience, which prevented citizens from learning from past mistakes. Moreover, the environment of post-communist freedom has allowed inflation of numerous historical misconceptions and has damaged relationships among various nations as well as groups of individuals. The former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union's successor states are sad examples of the Communist legacy.

It is evident, that the state of political culture in Slovakia – thanks also to the distorted historical memory – had effected every aspect of transformation after 1989; however, the impact is difficult to assess. Yet, to find such a relationship is of utmost importance because – as opposite to political structures that collapsed and disappeared – the political culture survived [the collapse of communist system in the minds of citizens and shaped the evolution of transformation after 1989. Due to the complexity of this relationship there is no way to measure this correlation directly, thus we must turn to indirect means and methods.

3. Transformation from Communism and “Transitology”

The demise of Communist regimes in the former Soviet bloc was an unprecedented historical event. Its magnitude is augmented by the fact that the Communist regimes distorted much of the value system these societies possessed historically. Any liberal democratic values were deemed by Communist ideology as a relic of bourgeois morals and decadent culture. A sudden confrontation of these societies with liberal-democratic rules that are not normative but consensual, caused much confusion and disarray. Although, in all post-communist societies the way to establish a

democratic structure was clearer than how they could bring into being a civil society and a free market. It was not a clear notion – and for a good reason considering that it was an unprecedented historical condition – how exactly to proceed with achieving the latter two goals. Not surprisingly, the post-communist transformation became a fertile soil for Western experts from various social sciences. Most prominent among these were the Sovietologists who were the first to give advice to Western and post-Communist governments and on what to do and how to proceed concerning political, economic, and social transformation in the post-Communist countries. Their qualification was the Communist and pre-Communist history and politics. They possessed, unfortunately, inadequate expertise to give advice on most of the complex and unprecedented processes of post-communist transformation.³⁷ Quite simply, most were stuck in the past.

The field of Sovietology focused on the developments within the Communist system predominantly in the Soviet Union and its satellites in East and Central Europe. Their expertise was an invaluable source of information and analysis for Western politicians and media dealing with the threat of Communist politics throughout the Cold War. Sovietologists helped us to understand the intricacies of the Communist rule and the dynamics of its evolution. Considering the momentous danger of the nuclear power of the Soviet Union, its irrational behavior and real and inflated threats behind its ideological propaganda, the extensive studies in the field of Sovietology were vital for devising Western policies and strategies while confronting the Soviet expansion

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See Peter Rutland: "Sovietology: Notes for a Post-Mortem" in *The National Interest*, 31 (Spring 1993), pp. 109-122. Rutland writes: "Sovietology utterly failed to foresee the speed and scope of the fall of the USSR. The collapse proved the intellectual approach of the Soviet studies community to be deeply flawed, in that it exaggerated the system's stability and the scope for top-

throughout the world. It was primarily thanks to numerous excellent studies by Sovietologists of various aspects of the Communist system that we ceased to perceive Communist countries as an invincible and monolithic political structure. Although some Sovietologists erroneously claimed that the Soviet system was able to transform itself into a more democratic structure, the most authoritative studies demonstrated in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s that the system simply exhausted its political and economic vigor. And, especially towards its end, was more about maintaining political power than about aiming at expanding its power across the globe.³⁸ The Soviet Union – still militarily dangerous to the West and repressive towards any signs of internal dissent – became, in fact, what some experts called “a third world country with nuclear warheads“. In other words, Sovietology provided necessary knowledge for the Western leaders to negotiate with and to deal with the Communist system. Thus, to a certain extent, it was conducive in preventing nuclear war that was for decades a real scenario. Unfortunately, this commendable contribution of Sovietology was paralleled by two developments that negatively effected it as an academic discipline.

down reform. Even among those few writers who had tried to sketch alternative futures for the USSR, only a handful even raised the possibility of system collapse." p.122.

³⁸ Western literature on the nature and functioning of the Communist system is enormous. The following are titles of a few books that were of great importance for understanding and/or had predictive capacity about the development of the Communist regimes. Zbigniew Brzezinski: Ideology and Power in Soviet Politics (1962, Praeger, New York); Z. Brezinski ed.: Dilemmas of Change in Soviet Politics (1979, Columbia University Press, New York); Z. Brezinski and Samuel Huntington: Political Power USA/USSR (1965, Viking Press, New York); Andrei Amalrik: Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984? (1970, Harper and Row, New York); Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod: How the Soviet Union is Governed (1979, Harward University Press, Cambridge); George W. Breslauer: Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders (1982, Allen and Unwin, London); Richard Pipes: Survival Is Not Enough (1984, Simon and Shuster, New York); Moshe Lewin: The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation (1988, University of California Press, Berkeley); Alexander Shtromas and Morton Kaplan, eds.: The Soviet Union and the Challenge of the Future (1988, Paragon Press, New York); George Urban ed.: Can the Soviet System Survive Reform? (1989, Pinter, New York).

First, the majority of Sovietologists, especially in the 1980s began more to predict than to analyze developments in the Communist states and, second, Sovietology became isolated from other disciplines of the social sciences. The reason for these two interconnected developments was that a number of institutes and departments led by prominent Sovietologists were increasingly relied upon by politicians, states (especially in the USA) and media for information and opinions about increasingly unstable Communist systems. Inevitably, many of these experts were not expected to provide academic analysis but rather an “expert opinion“ whither the Soviet Union or any of the Communist countries. This role of media pundits and government advisors appropriated by a number of Sovietologists was damaging to the discipline, and gave the impression that the main field of research was an unpredictable political system trying to restrict access to information about its functioning.³⁹ Indeed, the field became predominantly an empirical social science following from a distance the movement of the shadows on the wall of the Communist procession. The Communist system, powerful and protected by a nuclear umbrella, had been expected to last for the foreseeable future. To be sure, its unique characteristics, its isolation and secretiveness, made it difficult to be analyzed and studied by standard Western scientific methods that relied much on empirical evidence and a need for verification. The bipolar world – political and ideological – encouraged the Western experts to examine the Communist system and to elaborate methods and theories specifically designed and adequate only for dealing with such a political system.

³⁹ Thus Peter Rutland argued while analyzing what went wrong with Sovietology in his study that „The seduction of leading academics into the role of media pundits and soothsayers left paltry incentives for careful empirical research...” op.cit., p.112.

Needless to say, such an approach was viable only as long as the Communist system lasted. Hence, these experts were utterly shocked by the demise of Communist regimes.

The second problem of Sovietology was even more serious in that it was isolated from other fields of social sciences. The well-funded and respected institutes and centers of Sovietology, in many instances, did not cooperate with the other disciplines of social science and the humanities - especially political science.⁴⁰ Soviet studies thus lacked an adequate theoretical base that should incorporate, among other things, a general political theory of the study of the transformation to democracy. The result was that Sovietologists neither anticipated the fall of Communist regimes, nor, worse still, lacked the expertise to analyze the dynamics of the post-communist transformation.⁴¹

In the early 1990s, most Sovietologists referred to a study by Guillermo A. O'Donnell and Phillippe C. Schmitter. This study concerned itself with the transformation from autocratic regimes in southern Europe and Latin America.⁴² There was simply no other text that approximated an examination of the process of post-communist transformation. It was only gradually that scholars from the other social sciences started

⁴⁰ The Soviet area studies was methodologically feeble because of its isolation from the social science disciplines, writes P. Rutland (*op. Cit.* p.112), being in agreement with Frederick J. Flern Jr. and Erik P. Hoffmann „Sovietology and Perestroika: Methodology and Lessons from the Past“, Harriman Institute Forum (September 1991).

⁴¹ In this respect, A. Motyl wrote in 1992: „Sovietologists...will have to begin thinking as comparativists, as genuine political scientists. There are enormous obstacles to such a perestroika of the field. Institutional interests, professional inertia, personality conflicts, and other, strictly speaking nonintellectual, factors are sure to get in the way. In „The End of Sovietology: From Soviet Studies to Post-Soviet Studies“ In Alexander J. Motyl ed.: The Post-Soviet Nations: Perspectives in the demise of the USSR (1992, Columbia University Press, New York) p. 303.

⁴² Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Phillippe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead eds.: *op.cit.*

to fill the gap.⁴³ The well intended but ill-conceived advice by Sovietologists in economic and social strategy brought much damage to the transformation of the former Communist societies. The role of these experts needs to be recognized before we outline the tension that, to differing degrees, emerged in several of these societies. Suffice it to say, however, Sovietologists *qua* transitologists were not responsible for the inevitable difficulties of transformation, but certainly, their advice extended to Western and post-communist governments have negatively effected the process of transformation in post-communist countries.

Some prominent social scientists that advanced new theories of transformation recognized the multiplicity of this process and argued that the transformation from authoritarian and Communist rule was not comparable in magnitude. Claus Offe contested that besides political-constitutional transformation – common to both types of transformations – the post-communist one had to deal with a crisis of territorial integrity and a total revamp of the economy.⁴⁴ The key element of post-communist transformation has been its simultaneous changes within various areas. Offe identified triple level transformation effecting nationhood and constitution making, along with the "normal

⁴³ From 1993 an interesting debate evolved on pages of journal *Slavic Review*. See Sarah Meiklejohn Terry: "Thinking about Post-communist Transformation: How Different Are They?", 52:2 (Summer 1993); a controversy over the nature of transitology emerged between Philippe C. Schmitter with Terry Lynn Karl: "The Conceptual travels of Transitologists and Consolidationists" 53:1 (Spring 1994) and response by Valerie Bunce: "Should Transitologists Be Grounded?" 43:1 (Spring 1995); further exchange between Karl and Schmitter: "From an Iron Curtain to a Paper Curtain: Grounding Transitologists or Students of Post-Communism?" in 54:4 (Winter 1995) and finally Bunce's reply: "Paper Curtain and Paper Tigers" in the same issue. Also see article by Milada Anna Vachudová and Tim Snyder: "Are Transformations Transitory?" in *East European Politics and Society* 11:1 (Winter 1997). Finally see Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan: Problems of Democratic Transformation and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe (1996, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore)

⁴⁴ Claus Offe, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3.

politics" of allocation. However, the last in this list was more often mistaken for the essence of politics. In other words, Laswell's dictum about "who gets what, when, and how" – in terms of political power and economic resources – took precedence over such vital issues as the search for (national) identity or the establishing of rules for political conduct, building political institutions, procedures and human rights.

4. Crisis of the economic transformation

Out of the multi-faceted process of constitutional, political and national transformation, economic transformation is perhaps the most difficult, controversial and definitely among the most important. It was difficult because of the havoc and impoverishment the centralized economies brought to the former Communist societies. The perennial questions after 1989 were how to de-centralize, thus to privatize, how much to sell to foreign investors, how to create the *sine qua non* of a market economy – healthy competition? These were the questions the political leaders had to deal with while urgently attending to other segments of the transformation and while trying to survive in politics during regular democratic elections. What were the options available to them after the demise of Communist regimes? It was either the backing of radical economic policies accompanied by short-term sacrifices and social unrest, or it was the support of slow pace and half-measured reforms in order to preserve the social peace of a destitute population. The former option was risky because it might have caused the reformers defeat in election. The latter strategy proved also hazardous because it led to even deeper economic decline and thus political unrest. Devising an economic strategy was extremely difficult because theoretical formulas could not be applied equally in each

society. So what were the options open to politicians after the end of Communism? And what was the advice of Western politicians, financial institutions and economists? Especially, Western politicians and financial institutions as a precondition that post-communist countries must fulfill in order to receive economic assistance often took the neo-liberal recommendations of Western academics at face value.⁴⁵

After the fact, one may conclude that several factors should have been considered in political decision making with respect to economic transformation. The key was to assess the state of the economy and political culture prior to the reforms in 1989. It was easier to undergo radical reforms, let us say, in relatively prosperous Hungary, where economic reforms were taking place in the 1980s, than in impoverished Ukraine, where a most rigid economic structure required much more caution during the process of economic transformation. Conversely, the political leaders and Western advisors should have assessed the potential of respective post-communist societies to absorb the shocks which arose during economic transformation, and accordingly to design or recommend the pace and nature of economic reforms. This would have been a better strategy to

⁴⁵ Literature on post-communist economic transformation is extensive. I will restrict the list here only to a few important texts that appeared in the early 1990s not quoted from below in this brief section on economic transformation. See Pavel Bozyk: „The Transformation of East Central European Economies: A Critical Assessment“, in *Studies in Comparative Communism* 25:3 (September 1992) pp. 257-273; Robert Cambell: The Socialist Economy in Transition: A Primer on Semi-Reformed Systems (1991, Indiana University Press, Bloomington); Janos Kornai: The Road to a Free Economy (1990, Norton, New York); Janos Matyas Kovacs: „Introduction: Ex Occidente Lux?“ (pp. 14(pp. 1-4) and „From Reformation to Transformation“ (41-71) In *EEPS* 5:1 (1991); J. M. Kovacs and Marton Tardos eds.: Reform and Transformation in Eastern Europe: Soviet-Type Economics on the Threshold of Change (1992, London); Ronald H. Linden: „The New International Political Economy of East Europe“, In *Studies in Comparative Communism* 25:1 (March 1992) pp. 3-21; David Lipton and Jeffrey Sachs: „Privatization in Eastern Europe: The Case of Poland“, In *Brooking Papers on Economic Activities* 2 (1990) pp. 293-341; Adam Przeworski: Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America (1991, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge); Ronald Schoenfeld ed.: Transforming Economic Systems in East Central Europe In *Sudosteuropa Studien*, Band 51.

achieve successful transformation in the long run and might have prevented the ascension to power of various populists and nationalists who then hampered the course of not only economic but also political reforms. The case of Czechoslovakia after 1989 was a prime example of such an insensitive approach to economic reforms which was partially responsible for the tension between Czech and Slovak political leaders that eventually led to the break-up of that country. One of the first moves advanced by the populists who replaced reform-minded politicians in Slovakia in 1992 was halting of economic reforms. The reformers in Czechoslovakia failed to realize that after 1989 the population was more receptive to economic shock therapy in the more advanced Czech Republic than in Slovakia.⁴⁶ As sociologist Zora Bútorová observed, "...Slovak citizens supported [populist leader] Vladimir Mečiar because of his promise to carry out a milder, 'specific Slovak', scenario of economic reforms differing from the radical reforms launched by Václav Klaus".⁴⁷

Unfortunately, immediately after the fall of Communist regimes, very little attention was paid to the readiness of respective societies to absorb hardship connected with radical economic reforms. Radical reform became synonymous with liberal democracy, while slow pace with former Communists and populists. This set the pace and nature of political-economic development in post-communist Central Europe. A dichotomy existed in the respective willingness and conditions in the Czech Republic and

(1993, Sudosteuropa Gesellschaft, Munich).

⁴⁶ See opinion polls among Slovak citizens towards economic reforms in Zora Bútorová: „Attitudes Towards the Economic Transformation“ in Zora Bútorová ed.: Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia: A Public Opinion Profile of a Country in Transition (1997, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava) pp. 24-31.

Slovakia, and this set a different pace for reforms that contributed to the break-up of Czechoslovakia.

Radical economic reform was controversial because the initial general adoption of rigid monetary policies – the attempt to reform the economy as quickly as possible – brought mixed results. Many experts questioned the feasibility of such economic policies, as yet untested in countries suffering with such political instability and such destitution. "Four hundred million people", one commentator observed, "test academic theory that has no real-world precedent".⁴⁸ Adam Przeworski was equally critical in 1992 of a neo-liberal approach to economic reforms in post-communist central Europe:⁴⁹

[T]he economic transformations envisaged (in Eastern Europe) ironically mirror the communist project. They implement an intellectual blueprint drawn up within the walls of American academia and shaped by international financial institutions. These transformations are meant to have radical effects, to turn all existing social relations upside down. They offer a panacea, a magic elixir which, once taken, will cure all ills.

After numerous failures and some successes, one of the strongest proponents of economic shock therapy, Jeffrey Sachs, provided an apt and cynical response: "nothing went wrong, just governments did not follow our recipes".⁵⁰ And what was the recipe, the so-called "three pillars" of shock therapy? The first pillar consisted of hostility towards the government role in regulating economic policy, near absolute adherence to a balanced budget and stable money supply, and a choking off, at any price, of domestic inflation. The Second pillar meant aggressive promotion of export-led industries and the closing

⁴⁷ Zora Butorová: „Introduction“ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Richard Parker: "Shock Therapy and Transformation: The Economic Crisis of Post-Communist Reform" In *The Aspen Institute Quarterly* 4:4 (Autumn 1992) p. 45.

⁴⁹ Adam Przeworski: "The Neoliberal Fallacy" In *Journal of Democracy* 3:2 (June 1992) p.45.

down of inefficient enterprises. The third was rapid privatization of publicly owned enterprises and thus further decreasing the power of the state. The main problem with this, perhaps theoretically sound advice, is what was called a Catch-22 of post-communist economic transformation. The argument goes as follows: a strict monetary policy might bring social and eventually political turmoil that could oust the government and replace it with a populist and/or former Communist government that retreats from tight fiscal policies initiating economic slow-down and hence even more turmoil. As can be observed since 1989, this rule does not apply equally in all post-communist societies. With respect to economic reforms, some societies tried and succeeded, some tried and failed and some never tried.⁵¹ Logically, the more affluent the society, the quicker the reforms could have been done. However, except for the Czech Republic and Slovenia, no other post-communist society could soon after 1989 sustain fast economic reforms that brought along poverty and a breakdown of the social safety net that the population had been used to during the Communist era. Not surprisingly, after former Communists or populists came to power they could not deliver what they promised. The result was a general slow down of economic reforms and even bleaker economic condition than

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Parker op.cit., p.44.

⁵¹ By 1994 former Communist parties were elected in Poland, Hungary, and in Slovakia after reformists were ousted. Bulgaria and Romania had been ruled by former Communists since 1989. Yet even these leftist (former Communist governments) took a different approach toward reforms. In this respect, a sound argument is put forward by Milada A. Vachudová and Tim Snyder who argue that „the character of the Communist party during communism’s last decade is critical in explaining the quality of the left-wing alternative available to an electorate weary of economic reforms.“ More reform minded communists in Hungary and Poland were more reform minded than their counterparts in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. Slovakia being a special case where a left-wing alternative was represented by a populist Mečiar rather than Peter Weiss, the leader of the former Communist Party. Vachudová and Snyder: „Are Transitions Transitory? Two Types of Political Change in Eastern Europe since 1989“ In *East European Politics and Societies* 11:1 (Winter 1997) pp. 1-35.

before. And, as was the case in Czechoslovakia, the different view of economic policies in the two republics was the key element that prompted the Czech leaders to agree to the break-up of the federation in order to preserve the fast pace of economic reforms in the Czech Republic.⁵²

Yet, the controversy stems not only from the damage shock therapy caused in some post-communist countries, but also the realization that there is no sound alternative.⁵³ This might sound as if it contradicts what was said above, but this is one of the paradoxes of post-communist transformation. There has not been any social democratic or leftist alternative to market building in eastern and central Europe that could have distinguished or separated itself from the former Communist and populists. Although in theory there is the Keynesian strategy employing sensitive social and political measures, in reality they are nowhere to be found in post-Communist societies. It can be argued that Keynesian economic policy is not applicable to early stages of post-communist transformation.

⁵² Stephen Holmes: "Cultural Legacies or State Collapse? Probing Postcommunist Dilemma" in Michael Mendelbaum ed.: Postcommunism: Four Perspectives (1996, A Council of Foreign Relations Book, New York) p.62. See especially section "State-Building in the Czech Republic (pp. 61-68) in Holmes' article admiring Czech economic and political strategy under the leadership of Václav Klaus after 1989.

⁵³ See for example Josef C. Brada who is a proponent of rapid, "big bang" privatization. He dismisses the argument that strict neo-liberal policies inevitably invite former communist and populists to win elections over the reformers (p.105). He claims that the results for the good of the society were disastrous when economic reforms were not introduced or slowed down. To be fair to Brada, he is not as extreme in his arguments as J. Sachs. Brada acknowledges that it is irrelevant whether his arguments regarding rapid or gradual economic reforms in post-communist societies are sound or not. He does not provide recipes, but rather provides arguments that find a rapid economic transformation the most suitable for such conditions. Economic policies in the post-communist societies were chosen, Brada argues, by politicians within a revolutionary situation on the background of historical circumstances and rapid changes of transforming post-communist societies. (pp. 107-108) J.C. Brada: "The Transformation from Communism to Capitalism: How Far? How Fast?" In *Post-Soviet Affairs* 9:2 (1993), pp. 87-110.

Adam Przeworski, a prominent social scientist who studied transition to democracy by authoritarian regimes in Latin America and southern Europe, maintained back in 1986 that the Keynesian system is “extremely fragile” for a period of such political and social turmoil.⁵⁴ It can operate in countries that are stable and wealthy, and within a population that understands the complexity and purpose of such a strategy. It needs a structural and cultural setting that has been missing in post-communist countries. Przeworski argues that an economy in transition needs low taxes, restricted wages and high profits so the investor feels safe to invest and thus boost production and consumption. Paradoxically, then, in order to implement Keynesian economic policies that protect the poorest and alleviate the negative impact of economic cycles, it must be preceded by some sort of shock therapy. This solution is yet another aspect of Catch-22 within post-communist transformation. Shock therapy usually removes reformers from power, and those who replace them do not implement sensitive social policies that slowly and gradually improve economic conditions. Indeed, none of the politicians who replaced those politicians who promoted the shock therapy initiated anything resembling Keynesian economic transformation.⁵⁵ Instead, all of them promoted a hybrid composed of some

⁵⁴ Adam Przeworski: “Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy” in Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Phillipe C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead eds.: Transformation from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies op.cit., p.62-63.

⁵⁵ There are several Western observers who have promoted an alternative to rapid economic reforms. They emphasize a gradual or evolutionary approach in post-communist reforms. It is interesting that neither Western governments and financial institutions, nor central and east European politicians by and large ignored the advice of these academics. One of the reasons is that although their criticism of rapid transformation is sound, they propose a limited concrete alternative to neo-liberals. Also, these gradualists acknowledge that efficient economic institutions and enterprises in post-communist countries necessary for a prosperous economy “will take many years to create”. Peter Murrell: “Evolution in Economics and in the Economic Reform of the Centrally Planned Economies” In Christopher Clague and Gordon C. Rauser eds.:

old Communist central planning elements and wild uncontrolled privatization blended with widespread corruption and nepotism. The billions to be invested into reviving the faltering economies were embezzled by a few who pocketed the nation's most profitable parts. The Czechs invented even a name for it: "tunelovat" or "tunneling". It means that for a fraction of the real price, a privatizing company overtly preserved its outside structure and status, but in reality such a company serves only to borrow heavily from banks, draw on state subsidies, remove and transfer assets, and eventually abandon a plundered company.

To sum up, it is clear that economic transformation is perhaps the most important element influencing the political climate, welfare, and the determination to eradicate the legacy of the past in each post-communist society. Its success or failure, in fact, determines the nature and orientation of government. If a society is prosperous, it becomes liberal, democratic and stable more easily. If, to the contrary, a society remains poor and lacks the tenacity to undergo economic reforms, the whole democratic constitutional framework suffers. Thus, the building of a civil society is under the siege of populists, nationalists and *nouveau riche* who are protected by or even closely connected with organized crime. The economic transformation is most fragile because the state of the economy is not a matter of political will, but depends on the most contingent and quixotic elements of liberal democracy – namely, the market.

The Emergence of Market Economies in Eastern Europe (1992, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, MA) p. 50.

5. The Legitimacy Factor⁵⁶

The theoretical framework outlined thus far includes the theories of illiberal democracies, political culture and political and economic transformation. These are necessary tools for analysis, but only in a limited way do they account for unexpected changes of post-communist transformation in general, and are even more deficient as pertaining to the unique development in Slovakia. The reason is that due to its contingent nature and being without historical precedence, post-communist transformation generates its own dynamics and influences political developments. The theory of illiberal democracies depicts the different character of "new democracies" and measures the degree of democratization among various post-communist countries. The analysis of political culture provides a background, and accounts for the long-term impact that effects the nature of transformation. Thus, the various theories of transformation outlined above describe and analyze the unfolding of political, social and economic events after 1989 in post-communist countries. Overall, these theories cannot pinpoint to what extent the evolution of transformation was affected by contingent causes, i.e., the unexpected developments during the transformation period that could not be anticipated simply by analyzing the political culture of society or any other long-term factor. Yet, short and long-term factors are somehow related, even though this relation can neither be measured

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The topic of legitimacy is one of the principal themes in political science, and has been used by Sovietologists while studying the political culture of Communist regimes. Western scholars have intensively studied the issue of the legitimacy of post-communist regimes. This section is not based on this burgeoning literature on post-communist legitimacy as will be clear from my analysis. However, I would like to refer to some of the seminal texts dealing with the problem of legitimacy in post-communist countries. See Giuseppe Di Palma: "Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society: Politico -Cultural Change in Eastern Europe", In *World Politics* 44:1 (1991) pp. 49-80; Leslie Holmes: The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis (1993, Polity Press, Cambridge); Elemer Hankiss: East European Alternatives (1990, Clarendon Press, Oxford).

nor anticipated. It is evident though, in observing various post-communist societies, that even those most unexpected, contingent developments – like the break-up of Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia – though not directly encoded in political culture or historically predetermined, were influenced by historical conditions. Under certain circumstances and thanks to certain unresolved and unattended issues from the past, such outcomes were made feasible.

What is still missing is the answer to the question of why certain countries were able to overcome their difficulties during transformation, why some experienced civil war, and why some simply "missed the boat" and were not able to reform their societies. Conversely, is it at all possible to anticipate what direction a post-communist country will follow? Certainly, there are certain stable societies such as Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary that would hardly become illiberal democracies. On the other hand, Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine seemed never out of danger despite temporary positive developments. Could there be a factor indicating that political development in a country could be anticipated? It will be argued here that the role of political leaders in various post-communist societies could indirectly be used as such an indicator. This is so because political leaders are not always free to implement the policies they choose. The degree of freedom the politicians have depends on the amount of legitimacy they enjoy among the majority of the population. Hence, this legitimacy of the political leaders seems to be the crucial factor. It could serve as a warning sign, a measuring stick assessing conditions and indicating the possible direction of a transformation process. In other words, the legitimacy of political leaders has properties of an independent variable, which is a key factor in while analyzing developments, patterns and trends in a society. This draws

strictly on the internal conditions of a country in transition, as opposed to relying on some outside theoretical or ideological perspective.

So, let us examine closely what such an approach implies, in isolating an independent variable. Let us outline the components – the dependent variables – that we have to take into consideration when searching for this independent variable. There is the population that decides during an election what kind of leaders will lead a country. As in every democratic country, the decision about the nature of the political system and the direction of the political process is decided at the ballot box. The decision of the population during the election is conditioned by certain political culture factors, such as its present perception of its welfare and its perception of its future prospects. The role of political leaders is of utmost importance in a society which is being politically and economically transformed. Politicians must judge the disposition and mood of the population in order to prevail after the next election. This is, of course, the case in each democratic country, but for societies in the post-communist transformation period this aspect is of much greater importance because a change of government might mean not only a different political administration, but could lead to a fundamental alteration of the political regime. New political leaders in these countries, still not restricted by adequate checks and balances of liberal democracy, might sway their societies into illiberal or even an authoritarian course, and yet enjoy popular legitimacy. This scenario might suggest that not strictly democratic and moral principles but policies should be the guiding considerations for even a liberal politician in a post-communist society. Partially true, especially, if a society's political culture and grave economic condition require not radical reforms but much caution and patience with respect to transformation.

A politician with high degree of legitimacy might initiate more daring policies than a politician that is without legitimacy. In other words, predominantly, political decision-making depends on the legitimacy a political leader enjoys among the population. Again, this is not a novel observation but what is important is the disposition of a population and the legitimacy of politicians. These are the indicators to what direction a post-communist society might evolve.⁵⁷

So, let us apply empirical evidence and examine the correlation between the legitimacy of political leaders in Slovakia and the state of political culture and the nature of political regime in Slovakia during 1989-1998 period. Logically, the legitimacy of political leaders as an independent variable should reflect the changing nature of dependent variables. Hence, following the legitimacy of political leaders we could trace whether, if any, a shift emerged in the state of political culture in Slovakia. As an example, let us consider the leaders who came to power immediately after November 1989. We can observe a clear discrepancy between the state of political culture among the majority of the population in Slovakia, and the radical economic reforms the political leaders intended to introduce. This discrepancy resulted in a sharp drop in legitimacy and the subsequent replacement of these liberal democratic leaders by populists and nationalists (see Chapter III, section 5). However, this drop in legitimacy was not solely due to the radical policies these politicians tried to implement. It will be argued that these leaders lacked legitimacy in the first place due to the fact that they had been

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This not the general rule for all post-communist societies. Those countries that have not wavered since 1989 from the path of building a stable liberal society have, during those years, erected enough checks and balances, and have built the rule of law so that even if a populist with authoritarian tendencies would somehow win the elections, the solid political system would not allow liberal society to be derailed.

unknown to the population before November 1989 and, by and large, were not part of an anticommunist underground or dissident movement that had been strong in the Czech Republic. The Czech dissidents *qua* politicians enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy after 1989, and prevailed in power even though they promoted radical, often unpopular economic policies. Hence, we can state that, the Slovak political leaders after 1989 acted prematurely and by its radical economic policy endangered their own position as well as democracy in Slovakia. According to this typology, they should have done everything in their power to slow down economic reforms and ease the hardship of economic downturn on the population. To their defense, it might be stated that in November 1989, they did not plan to enter politics and were pushed to their position after the power vacuum caused by the sudden collapse of the Communist leadership. They were the product of political culture in Slovakia before 1989, where the Communist regime had managed to extinguish any form of resistance, as will be argued in section 4 of Chapter III.

The legitimacy of political leaders as the independent variable thus allows us to construct a theoretical framework suitable to analyze, not only the developments in Slovakia, but might also serve as a general theory to examine predominantly unstable post-communist societies. There are three basic elements to this theoretical framework: politicians, population (its political culture) and the state of the economy. The nature of post-communist transformation varies from country to country, and depends on the relationship and interplay between these three components. We will observe what kind of regime might emerge from such a society, how the population perceives politics and how the economic condition influences the other two. The state of political culture and how politicians perform in their position of power determine the legitimacy of political

leaders. The perception by the population of politicians' own conduct, i.e., the factor determining the latter legitimacy, is indicative of the kind of outcome and what kind of regime we might anticipate in a post-communist society.

The four different combinations in Table 1 represent various scenarios and tendencies existing in post-communist societies. Let us examine all four possible combinations.

TABLE 1.

	I.	II.	III.	IV.
Politicians:	Pro-democratic Pro-market	Pro-democratic pro-market	Anti-West Anti-market	[Anti-West] Anti-market
Population:	Pro-democratic population, Accepts sacrifices	Refuses reforms; Votes out pro- reform politicians	Refuses reforms even at the price of widespread poverty	Pro- democratic population, accepts sacrifices
Economy:	Good	Good-Bad	Bad	Good-Bad
Independent Variable: legitimacy of politicians	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW
Outcome in a society:	If economy, social condition worsen danger of illiberal dem. – caution re. Economic reforms Necessary	If the population refuses populists– there is return to reform	Civil unrest; Degradation; Civil war	Populists lose if free and fair elections are held
Regimes:	Becoming Lib. Democracy	Fragile Lib. Democracy	Illiberal Democracy	If politicians are not authoritarian – there is return to Lib. Dem.
Countries that following this pattern:	Czech Rep. Hungary Poland Slovenia Baltics	After 1989: Romania Bulgaria	Yugoslavia Belarus Russia Rumania (after 2000)	Romania (since 1997) Bulgaria (until 1998) Croatia (in 2000)
Slovakia within these typologies:	after 1998	after 1989	after 1992	In 1998

This general typology lends itself to analysis, and provides an explanation for the changes that took place in Slovakia during the 1989-1998 period. In the first combination (I), politicians promote and are able to implement pro-reform liberal-democratic and pro-market economic policies. These politicians require a high degree of general approval, that is, high legitimacy. The approval of policies and politicians depends on the success of reforms. This was the case of successful transformations in central Europe such as in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and to a certain degree in the Baltic republics. With certain reservations, Slovakia after the elections in September 1998 can be included in this group. The reservation is due to a weak economic performance explained in part by mismanagement by the previous government. Whether Slovakia will remain in this group depends on to what extent the government is able to ease the hardship of the population while implementing radical reforms. Slovakia must comply with the requirement of the European Union in order to become a candidate for early admission (see Chapter VI). Only as a member of the EU will Slovakia be able to remain in the group of countries that undergo successful transformation. In the second combination (II), politicians – pro-reform and with liberal outlook – try but fail to implement the same policies as in the first group. The population does not find them feasible and is unwilling to suffer economic hardship for (uncertain) future economic prosperity. The politicians – lacking sufficient legitimacy – fail to realize that they are doomed to blunder in their pro-reform efforts, especially if combined with a depleted economy. Here we can list countries immediately after the fall of Communist regimes like Romania, Bulgaria and to a certain extent Slovakia.

The third combination (III) represents politicians who are mostly former Communists replacing the old Communist guard immediately or soon after the demise of the Communist regimes. They certainly do not plan to promote reform policies and there is no pressure from society to implement political and economic reforms. On the contrary, using nationalist and populist rhetoric, the politicians instigate anti-Western and anti-liberal policies reflecting the state of political culture in their respective countries. They enjoy a high degree of legitimacy in promulgating policies that further impoverish the population. Populist and nationalist tactics of stressing internal and external enemies keep the population in constant tension, while the depleted economy only gradually diminishes the legitimacy of its leaders. Besides poverty and political unrest, civil war is a permanent possibility in such tense, often mafia infested and hate-incited societies. Persistent abuse of human rights and disregard for the rule of law by the government turns these former Communist states into popular, democratically-supported authoritarian regimes. These are Fareed Zakaria's "illiberal democracies".

The last combination (IV) is rarest where a society is more mature than its leadership. The leadership enjoys little legitimacy and if free and fair elections are held the populist and nationalist politicians are swept away and are replaced by liberal democrats. It is often a direct outcome of scenario III where the population after a long period of economic hardship refuses to support populists and nationalists. The reason for the dismissal of such a populist government varies. Either the society is fed up with corruption and poverty inflicted by a corrupt and incompetent government, or a society becomes a more civil society. In the former case a simple outrage might bring democrats to power -- but if they are unable to deliver material improvement quickly, the populists

might return. In the latter case, the majority in a society is aware of the grimness of economic and social hardship, and is willing to a certain degree to suffer short-term hardship for long term prosperity. Such a phenomenon represents a shift within political culture. Slovakia in 1998 represents such a case. Despite populist rhetoric and nationalist propaganda, the majority said “no” to Mečiar’s political demagoguery. To a lesser degree, this occurred in Bulgaria and Romania in recent years, though in those countries the societies only dismissed Communist regimes in disguise, and it is questionable how much the people are willing to sacrifice, considering the extremely difficult economic conditions.

Let us conclude by applying the above theoretical framework to explore how the long-term historical and political culture factors link up with the short-term contingencies of transformation. What is legitimacy’s role as the key elements where political culture meets the contingency of human decisions made by political leaders during the transformation period? The political culture, a continuous factor even after the fall of Communism, has an impact on a population’s readiness and willingness to withstand the hardship of a transformation period. A good politician thus must not only be a sound democrat and reformer wishing and working for fast reform, but also a good psychologist knowing the nature and disposition of the population. It is evident that successful political decisions require great courage, wisdom and patience on the part of politicians. Yet, none of these are sufficient if politicians do not enjoy legitimacy within a society. In order to be able to initiate thorough political, constitutional and economic reforms, politicians require broad societal approval and support. Without strong legitimacy, the unpopular reform measures, rejected by a discontented electorate, can cause the removal

of political leaders during regular, democratic elections. In post-communist transformation societies after such elections, the new political guard has never been equally reform-minded but rather it implements *ersatz* reform and is never short of populist rhetoric promising what they could never have delivered.

It is also important to note that legitimacy is not strictly dependent on short-term contingency decisions of politicians during a transformation period. It had depended on their position and behavior before the fall of the Communist regimes as much, if not more than on the policies after the fall of the Communist regimes. This was the crucial factor for the dissimilar developments in former Czechoslovakia where the legitimacy of Czech and Slovak leaders was notably different. If a politician were part of a recognized anticommunist establishment (like Václav Havel or Petr Pithart, the first PM of the Czech Republic), the legitimacy of such a politician was incomparably greater than of a politician who emerged out of nowhere after 1989. Societies with political cultures that managed to produce a group of people ready to resist the Communist "faustian contract", granted great legitimacy even to politicians who lacked political courage, wisdom or patience – however, not for a long period if politicians were not able to improve economic and social conditions. To the contrary, a society like Slovakia that had a barely viable dissident movement, and no recognized figures who formed an anticommunist establishment before 1989, could hardly produce a political leadership that was able and willing to initiate unpopular political and economic steps. The first Slovak political leaders after 1989 were unknown to the population. However brave and wise and to a degree acquainted with the need of triple-level transformation, they were replaced by political leaders who comforted the majority of the population, who preferred and longed

for some aspects of socialist "cradle-to-grave" caring by the state that they had been accustomed to before 1989.

Review

In this chapter, the task was to provide an outline of the theoretical framework appropriate to comprehend ten years of post-communist transformation in Slovakia. In order to explain this systemic and structural transformation, an expanded theoretical framework was designed. In addition to theories of political culture and political and economic transformation, two additional theories on illiberal democracy and legitimacy were incorporated in order to explain not only why Slovakia became an illiberal democracy, but why, unexpectedly, this regime was defeated.

Although having significant impact, neither a theory of transformation nor an account of Slovak political culture alone could explain the turbulent changes during this period. We thus located an independent variable that could help to comprehend and explain the political changes during the period from 1989-1998. The legitimacy of political leaders was designated as the independent variable to account for and even anticipate the nature of the regime of a post-communist society. It particularly helped to explain the unexpected changes that took place in Slovakia during the 1989-1998 period. It provided a tool to analyze in the next chapters, long-term (political culture and history) and short-term (contingency of post-communist transformation) dependent variables that shaped the nature of transformation in Slovakia.

Chapter II

From a “People without a State” to the Czechoslovak Federation

Overview

The primary aim of this chapter is to outline the main historical developments that conditioned the Slovak political culture and influenced events during the post-communist transition. It is not a historical excursion into the distant and recent history of Slovakia. Rather, it is a review of a stereotypical historical interpretation that has been the focus of discourse after 1989 in Slovakia -- a society that before 1989 was for five decades under two undemocratic regimes, fascist and communist. It was a period that had a decisive effect on political culture in Slovakia and on the perception and interpretation of history by its citizens. Hence, the long-term factors that influenced the path of post-communist transformation were interpreted and shaped under the conditions of non-democratic political regimes. The regimes that wished to usurp history and consciousness of Slovaks in order to fortify its ideological armor. The general confusion about Slovakia's history was effectively misinterpreted and misused by nationalists and populists who set the tone of politics from 1990 onwards. An important and also the most abused aspect of Slovakia's history was that of its relations with two neighboring nations: the Hungarians and Czechs. Many negative but also positive developments that took place after 1989 in Slovakia can be traced to a checkered historical journey within Slovakia.

Introduction

Depending on the focus of analysis, there are several ways in which to divide the history of a country. Slovakia, being part of central Europe, experienced throughout the centuries numerous political, cultural and economic changes that culminated in the turbulent 20th century when its political arrangements and geographical boundaries shifted several times. In order to trace the historical precondition for political

development during the period of 1989-1998, the turning points in this and the following chapters will be events that had an impact on Slovakia's statehood. In this chapter, as the culmination of historical developments, the events during the so-called "Prague Spring" will be considered, along with the declaration of Czechoslovak federation in 1968, and in the next chapter the creation of independent Slovakia in 1993. Surely, there were landmarks of equal historical importance, like the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the creation of a Slovak Republic in 1939, the rise (1948) and fall (1989) of the Communist regime. However, the two events of 1968 and 1993 were generated from within and significantly conditioned the political discourse and evolution of Slovak society for years to come.

History itself rarely conditions political development. What really matters, especially during political and systemic upheavals, is the perception of history, its misuse and interpretation by politicians and in the media. The misinterpretation of various periods of Slovak history by nationalists and populists after 1989, conditioned by a certain political agenda, were presented and accepted by a large segment of the population as being based on historical "facts" and "truths". Accepted because one of the legacies of fascist and communist regimes was a lack of authoritative historical literature and textbooks that could enable those with a better education, and also students, to form judgements based on a relatively objective interpretation of history.⁵⁸

In this chapter after a brief outline of the distant history of Slovakia starting in the 10th century, the focus will be the 19th century, during which the checkered Slovak-Hungarian relations had the greatest impact on modern Slovak history. In the second part

the main events of the 20th century until 1968 will provide a brief outline of Czech and Slovak coexistence that culminated in the formation of the Czechoslovak Federation in 1968 as the only surviving element of the reform process initiated during the so-called the "Prague Spring". This period, and especially 1968, is of great importance for understanding the turbulent and often confused discussions after 1989.⁵⁹

1. A Thousand Years of Magyar and Habsburg Rule

It is often repeated both by Slovak nationalists and many non-nationalists that in contrast to other surrounding nations, Slovaks until the 20th Century did not have their own state⁶⁰. This for them constitutes a handicap that produced a nation in the 20th Century that has been divided, lacking self-confidence and not behaving as sovereign nations do. The implicit point in this argument is that conditions under which Slovaks lived in the Kingdom of Hungary and subsequently in the Habsburg Empire do not

⁵⁸ See roundtable discussion among prominent Slovak historians on the topic of the lack of reliable historical literature and textbooks in *Kritika & Kontext* 2-3/97 pp. 4-23.

⁵⁹ Several sociological studies and oral history research studies have revealed the confusion and stereotypical views of history, not only among the young and uneducated but also among educated Slovaks. See Samuel Abrahám and Iveta Radičová: "Aký model sociálnej politiky možno uplatňovať v období ekonomickej transformácie Slovenska" [What kind of social policy model is applicable for Slovakia during economic transformation] in Viem či odmietame a vieme čo chceme? [Do we know what we are rejecting and what we really want?] In I. Radičová, ed. (1997, Space, Bratislava).

⁶⁰ The most fervent nationalists claim that Slovakia had a state in the Eighth Century named the Great Moravian Empire, and that present-day Slovakia is a continuation of this state. Firstly, no states as such existed in the tenth century. Secondly, Slovaks did not exist at that time. Their predecessors constituted Slavic inhabitants who only later diversified into the nations as we know today. There is nothing wrong with trying to identify the historical roots of any nation, on the contrary it provides a point of commonality among the nations that claim the same origin. However, to base Slovakia's history on something we know little about as the first Slovak Empire is absurd. (pace Milan Ďurica: Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov [A history of Slovakia and Slovaks]

constitute an honorable enough history and Slovaks should reject that period of subjugation. Hence, the 20th Century represents for nationalists a process of disassociating themselves from their own thousand-year-long history before 1918, and implicitly, the seventy two-year-long coexistence with the Czechs. Those Slovaks not following this 'natural emancipation process' are renegades who betray the true national cause. This stereotypical and rather 19th century romantic-nationalistic perception that only a state allows a nation to flourish, fortified by focusing on strong Magyarization of Slovaks in the second half of the 19th century, constituted a trauma of continuous injustice inflicted upon Slovaks. This trauma of past injustice influenced the development of modern Slovak history, and has still left the nation divided and unable to handle its own past. Even among Slovaks who are not of nationalistic persuasion, it is emotionally difficult to overcome a certain feeling of Slovaks having been historically maltreated.

The history of Slovakia must be seen within the complex history of the Habsburg Monarchy, and especially its 19th Century period when national emancipation within its borders conditioned its decline and fall.⁶¹ As Peter Brock wrote about historical

(1995, SPN, Bratislava); see more authoritative history of Slovakia by Dušan Kovač: Dejiny Slovenska [A history of Slovakia] (1998, Lidové noviny, Prague).

⁶¹ On Habsburg Monarchy see R.W. Evans: The Creation of Habsburg Monarchy 1550-1700 (1984, Clarendon Press, New York; Oxford UP, London); Robert A. Kahn: The History of the Habsburg Empire: 1526-1918 (1978, University of California Press, Berkeley); Victor S. Mamatey: The Habsburg Empire: 1790-1918 (1978, Huntington, New York); A.J.P. Taylor: The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918 (1988, Penguin Books, London).

condition of Slovaks in his study of Slovak National awakening in late 18th and early 19th century.⁶²

Divided from the Magyars and from the Germans of north Hungary by language and ethnic origin, from the Czechs by a political frontier, from the Poles by the physical barrier of the Carpathian range, and from the Ruthenians (Ukrainians) by religion, the Slovaks had long possessed at least a vague feeling that they were different from their neighbors. At the same time close ties existed tending to unite the Slovaks with these neighboring peoples and to obscure that sense of otherness.

It is with this sense of alienation of Slovaks living within Hungary that was itself a part of the Habsburg Empire that one has to approach the historical and especially the 19th century struggle of Slovaks in their attempt to define its identity and nationhood. Without any attempt to idealize conditions in the Kingdom of St. Stephen of Hungary or the Habsburg Monarchy, any subjugation during the Middle Ages had a social and not an ethnic background. It was only with the rise of national consciousness in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that “ethnic belonging” became a new, significant dividing factor within the Habsburg Empire and all over Europe.⁶³ Gradually, one ethnic group defined itself by being superior to another group in order to legitimize its dominant position. During the reign of Joseph II, the German language replaced Latin – which had gradually ceased to maintain its position of *linga franca* – as the official language in order to ease communication and increase centralization within the multiethnic Monarchy. It helped to spearhead the national awakening of various non-German nations, especially Hungarians. The imposition of German was perceived as an attempt to favor the culture and education of the dominant ethnic group at the expense of another nations. This was aggravated by

⁶² The Slovak National Awakening (1976, University of Toronto Press, Toronto) p. 3. It is also an excellent source of especially Slovak historical and modern literature on this period.

rapid industrialization in the 19th century that initiated the movement of masses of peasants of various ethnic backgrounds into industrial centers. Uprooted and alienated, they started to seek what united them – native language and customs. Hence a new grouping emerged that was based on ethnic principles and forced by the overpowering and dominant cultures of the industrial centers of Europe.⁶⁴ As a result, ethnic tension exploded in many multi-ethnic regions of the Empire. This unfortunate language clash, and the crisis of romantically defined identity, industrialization and centralization of the state bred the most potent force of the 19th and 20th century – ethnic nationalism.

During the late 19th century, the dominant multi-ethnic European Empires were shaken by an emerging new European ethnic map. Some dominant ethnic groups – like Germans and Italians – formed nation-states and a myriad of small ethnic groups dispersed among the large nations, like Slovaks, Croats, Poles, and Lithuanians, ended up on the losing side. The Hungarians, with the Kingdom of St. Stephen dating back to the tenth century, and the geographical unit of Hungary, yet since the 16th century part of the German dominated Habsburg Empire, ended somewhere in the middle. Its ambition to ensure its equal political position within the Empire was squashed after the 1848 Revolution when another multi-ethnic Empire, Czarist Russia, came to assist the shaken Habsburgs to trounce the recalcitrant Hungarians. Militarily defeated, feeling isolated by being surrounded by dominant Germans and resentful Slavs and Romanians, Hungarians focused their subsequent energy on consolidating their position within their own geographical realm -- Hungary. This ambition was boosted by *Ausgleich* (equalization)

⁶³ See Miroslav Hroch: Europská národní hnutí v 19. století [European national movements in the 19th century] (1986, Prague).

of 1867 when the weakening Habsburg dynasty, in order to preserve its existence granted a great degree of autonomy to Hungarians and renamed its Empire Austro-Hungarian. The problem was that Hungarians, even within Hungary (although the largest ethnic group) were outnumbered by Slavs, Germans and Romanians. These minorities felt more and more threatened as their educational and cultural institutions were either closed or restricted within Hungary.⁶⁵

The late 19th century was thus an exceedingly oppressive period for Slovaks who constituted the northern part of Hungary. They were exposed to avid magyarization where the Hungarian language was the only permitted language in official use. The paradox was that Slovak culture, language and identity were suppressed by a nation that was itself afraid for the survival of its own national identity. The majority of Hungarians believed that if they did not impose their own language throughout the whole of Hungary, they would be – as the only Hungarian nation in the region – swallowed by Germans and the many Slavic nations that lived within Hungary.

Slavs and Hungarians and, for that matter, other nationalities in the Habsburg Empire before the late 18th century, did not differentiate themselves along ethnic lines. Their ethnicity had been previously secondary – the division was more according to rank, wealth, religion and qualifications. The common official language of the Empire was Latin until the late 18th century and the educated class communicated through Latin even later. Only after Joseph II introduced German as the language of communication among state officials, was the seed for ethnic tension sown. Hungarians, who had previously held

⁶⁴ Ernest Gellner: Nations and Nationalism (1983, Cornell University Press, Ithaca) pp. 19-38.

⁶⁵ See Wickham Steed: The Habsburg Monarchy (1919, Constable & Co. Ltd., London).

the most prominent position among non-Germans in the Empire, had most to lose by adopting German instead of Latin⁶⁶. They first demanded to use Latin in official communication but after they failed to attain this they rebelled against the encroachment of German language. They managed to enforce Hungarian within Hungary - evidently to the chagrin of non-Hungarians within Hungary including, not only the Slavs but also Rumanian and Germans⁶⁷.

Especially after the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich* of 1867, Hungarians had a free hand to impose the Hungarian language in all avenues of political, administrative, cultural life and education. This intensive magyarization, led to the closure of many Slovak basic and secondary schools, and the end of cultural institutions and Slovak newspapers. The result was that the Slovak educated middle class dwindled to a point beyond recovery. A tiny number of educated Slovak writers, clerics and politicians were lamenting and protesting but to no avail. As Slovak politician Jozef Lettrich, observed about grave social conditions of Slovaks during this period⁶⁸:

They had no nobility on their own, no commerce, no banking, no schools, no intelligentsia. They lived mostly as peasants or industrial laborers. Their standard of living was low. The state was not interested in their social welfare. Their prospects were meagre.

⁶⁶ Peter Brock writes: "[Joseph II's] attempt on grounds of public utility and for purpose of centralization to replace Latin by German as the official language of the Hungarian kingdom evoked strong opposition on the part of the nobles (the *natio hungarica* as they considered themselves) and gave birth to a movement that soon found widespread support among them to put Magyar, only recently being cultivated on a wide scale, in place of either Latin or German as the state language." *Op. Cit.* P.6.

⁶⁷ See C.J.C. Street: Hungary and Democracy (1923, London)

⁶⁸ Jozef Lettrich: History of Modern Slovakia (1955, Frederick A. Praeger, New York) p. 39.

Nevertheless, the magyarization of Slovaks could hardly be achieved within such a short period of time. The English historian Robert Seton-Watson wrote at the turn of the century, after his visit to various regions in Hungary, that Slavic languages would survive, although those who speak them were mostly uneducated peasants whom the state could not magyarize.⁶⁹ He concluded that magyarization will prove counterproductive because it only raised animosity among non-Hungarian Slavs who become less educated but not less numerous. The policy of magyarization produced a disloyal and disaffected population who, if opportunity came, would want to free themselves from their Hungarian oppressors. The result in Hungary on the eve of the First World War was a tragic picture where one nation in the name of its own survival was subduing every other nation.

So what started as a benign administrative ordinance by Joseph II in 1792, terminating Latin as an official language, initiated changes that led at the beginning of the 20th century to division and animosity among nations that defined themselves negatively *vis-a-vis* the other nations sharing the same administrative unit. Multicultural coexistence was no longer possible, instead a zero-sum scenario where middle ground between dominant and dominated nations disappeared. Whereas before, the societies were divided along social lines now the split ran along linguistic and ethnic identities. Jozef Lettrich wrote in this respect that, "the First World War sealed the fate of the Monarchy. The Slovaks contributed their share to its destruction. The Habsburg Empire had proven itself incapable of dealing with its nationalities".⁷⁰ As a result, ethnic division defined

⁶⁹ R.W. Seton-Watson: Racial Problems in Hungary (1908, Constable and Co. Ltd., London)

the dynamics of the whole 20th century. Suppression of its manifestation during the communist era only enhanced its irrational course after the demise of the Communist regimes.

2. The Czechoslovak and Slovak Republic 1918-1948

The creation of Czechoslovakia meant the end of magyarization and subjugation of Slovaks, and within twenty years of its existence Slovakia attained all the attributes of a modern society⁷¹. When the Habsburg Empire disintegrated in 1918, Slovakia lacked an educated middle class to support its own infrastructure. Only a handful of Slovak politicians and state employees could fill the vacant posts occupied previously by Hungarians who had been removed from their positions. A large group of Czech scholars, teachers, administrators and state employees moved to Slovakia in order to assist in the modernization of Slovakia. As a prominent Slovak historian Dušan Kováč wrote⁷²:

The creation of Czechoslovak Republic meant that Slovakia for the first time in its history became an independent administrative unit with internationally guaranteed and accepted borders. Unprecedented was Slovakia's accomplishment in the field of education and culture... Slovak language became the official language and the language of instruction in schools.... This momentous cultural ascent of Slovakia would not have been possible without substantial help from the Czechs.

⁷⁰ Lettrich op. cit., p. 41.

⁷¹ R.W. Seton-Watson: A History of the Czechs and Slovaks (1965, Archon Books, Hamden, Conn.)

⁷² Dušan Kováč: Slováci a Česi: dejiny [Slovaks and Czechs: their mutual history] (1997, AEP, Bratislava) p. 68.

Thus the vast majority of Slovaks welcomed the creation of Czechoslovakia, being aware of its importance for national survival. Yet from the beginning a large group of Slovak nationalists – mostly Catholics – resented the influence of the culturally, economically and politically more advanced and liberally minded Czechs.

As early as 1919 a number of mainly Catholic clerics and some conservative Protestants started to protest against the arrival of thousands of Czech primary, secondary school and university teachers. The Czechs were perceived by these nationalists as atheists who taught irreligious concepts to children of their devout flock. Their demand for the autonomy of Slovakia within Czechoslovakia was not about greater political or economic independence, but rather about their aim to control and regulate school curricula and influence local administration. They detested mostly the Slovak politicians who supported modern methods in education, and liberal and leftist ideas in politics, religion and culture.⁷³

There were two additional problems – economic and administrative policies and the idea of a Czechoslovak nation. The liberal politicians in Slovakia were predominantly Protestants and Czech politicians considered them as allies in advancing a backward and poor Slovakia. Already from the beginning there was a heated debate among politicians and commentators whether Slovakia should become autonomous or whether it was too premature in 1918⁷⁴. There were a few sound reasons for and against the autonomy of

⁷³ Ferdinand Peroutka: Budování Státu vol. 2. [Building of the state] (1980, Universum Sokol Publ., N. J.) p.153.

⁷⁴ One of the most prominent Slovak politicians who urged Slovakia's autonomy was Milan Hodža who saw in denying it as more oil to the fire of nationalists and separatists. Unfortunately, in the Czech Republic it was not a politician but a journalist, although a most prominent one, Ferdinand Peroutka who also from the beginning echoed Hodža's concerns. See Hodža, M.: Federation in Central Europe (1942, Jarrolds Publishers, London) and Peroutka *ibid.* pp. 155-159.

Slovakia.⁷⁵ In retrospect, autonomy should have been given from the beginning because the more it was delayed, the more difficult it would be to implement. Eventually, when in the 1930s Slovak society produced its own political and cultural elite and thus was ready for self-rule, pressure from Germany and Hungary prevented the process of consolidation. This procrastination caused Slovak autonomists from the 1920s to become separatists in the late 1930s. Not surprisingly, the separatists were well received and supported by Germany, and covertly by Hungary.

When the borderlands of Czechoslovakia were taken over by Germans after the Munich Agreement in September 1938, Slovakia received its long-delayed autonomy. However, soon afterwards the democratic Slovak parties were first ignored and then outlawed. In March 1939 when the Czech Republic was fully occupied by Hitler's army, Slovak nationalist politicians were left with a choice either to become an independent country, albeit Germany's satellite, or also be occupied – most likely by Hitler's ally, Hungary. The leader of the separatists was a priest and politician, Jozef Tiso, who had been involved in politics since the 1920s. He and the Slovak Parliament – reduced of

⁷⁵ Arguments against autonomy: The German minority in 1918 was more numerous than the population of Slovaks. There was simply no Slovak manpower to run a country that needed very radical, comprehensive restructuring of the economy, the educational system and whole infrastructure. The Hungarian minority, most affluent, educated and influential in Slovakia was hostile towards Czechoslovakia. Despite the treaty of Trianon, where Slovakia was to be separated from Hungary, Hungarians in Slovakia were still trying to sway this decision. Also, in 1919 after a short-lived revolution in Budapest, Hungarian Communist troops occupied part of southern Slovakia. Arguments for autonomy: In retrospect, risk worth taking. After initial improvisation and assistance, a political class could be built that could later on easily handle nationalists and populists. From the beginning, the great majority of Czech politicians never really understood the situation in Slovakia and could not grasp that those Slovak politicians they could do business with (mostly Slovak Protestants) did not represent a majority of Slovaks. When in the 1930s the Slovak political scene was mature and objectively ready for autonomy, it was even more difficult to realize because of hostility from Germany and Hungary and their collaborators within Czechoslovakia. See Rothschild, J.: The East Central Europe between Two World Wars (1977, University of Washington Press, Seattle).

democrats and Communists -- opted for the formal independence of Slovakia.⁷⁶ The creation of such a state was in difficult international circumstances and under the duress of Germany. Nationalists have argued that this truncated independent state was a more viable alternative to direct occupation by Germany and Hungary. The fact remains that "the proclamation of Slovak Republic was not the consequence of emancipation process of Slovaks as falsely heralded by the Slovak fascist propaganda later on [during the war and afterwards in exile]. Quite evidently, it was a byproduct of Hitler's aggression".⁷⁷

This fascist regime certainly should not be celebrated – as it was by nationalists after 1989 – as a sought-after and widely cherished independent Slovak state. It was legally independent but de facto a satellite that could not exercise its sovereignty from Nazi Germany. What it meant was that it was predestined to follow the anti-democratic and inhuman policies of the Third Reich. In actual fact, the Slovak leadership not only followed the steps of its German mentor, it aimed to outdo it. Democratic and Communist parties were outlawed, and many of their supporters imprisoned. Worse still, the government implemented anti-Jewish laws more draconian than the infamous Nuremberg Laws.⁷⁸ As early as 1939, Slovakia started to confiscate property and subsequently started the deportation of its Jewish citizens. As the Germans could not cope with receiving all transports, the Slovak government offered and paid 500

⁷⁶ See Ivan Kamenec: Jozef Tiso (2000, Kalligram, Bratislava) p. 34.

⁷⁷ Ivan Kamenec: Slovenský štát [Slovak republic] (1992, Lidove noviny, Prague) p. 5.

⁷⁸ Ján Korček: Slovenská republika 1943-1945 [Slovak Republic 1943-1945] (1999, Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava) pp. 65-69.

Reichmarch per Slovak Jew taken by Germany.⁷⁹ The most evident demonstration that the wartime regime faced a large internal opposition was the proclamation of Slovak National Uprising in August 1944.⁸⁰ A wide spectrum of antifascist forces, including the Slovak Army, rebelled against Tiso's regime and declared their pledge to the continuity of Czechoslovakia.⁸¹ Although, with the help of the Nazis the Uprising was suppressed, it provided an indigenous antifascist legacy from within Slovakia.

The perception of the existence of a Slovak state was a highly contested issue after November 1989 in Slovakia. The small but clamorous group of nationalists already in early 1990 demanded the pardoning of the wartime regime and especially President Tiso who, as a war criminal, was sentenced and executed in 1946. The general public was divided, and even a number of non-nationalists saw it as appropriate to exonerate Tiso, whose trial was presented as a Communist plot. Also many Slovaks were fond of the economic successes of the wartime regime and accepted that the deportation of Jews

⁷⁹ The transports stopped in 1942 after Tiso officially received a note from the Vatican that the transported Jews were mass killed in the concentration camps. However, there is evidence that those responsible for the transports knew beforehand about the final destination of transports. In fact, they stepped up the transports and delayed revealing the Vatican letter to President Tiso. See Yeshayahu A. Jelinek: The Parish Republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party: 1939-1945 (1976, EEQ – Boulder, Co.) See also correspondence between the Vatican and the government of the Slovak Republic regarding the deportation of Jews in 1943 In Ivan Kamenec, Vilém Prečan and Stanislav Škovránek eds.: Vatikán a Slovenska republika 1943-1945 – dokumenty [Vatican and the Slovak Republic 1943-1945 – documents] (1992, Slovak Academic Press, Bratislava) pp. 92-150.

⁸⁰ See Jozef Jablonický: Glosy o historiografii SNP [Reflections on Historiography of the Slovak National Uprising] (1969/1994 NVK International, Bratislava); Vilém Prečan ed.: Slovenské národné povstanie – dokumenty [Slovak National Uprising – documents] (1965, Bratislava)

⁸¹ Several authors stress that although antifascist groups fought for the renewal of Czechoslovakia, their goal was not its centralized form as existed before 1938. See Jan Rychlík: Češi a Slováci ve 20. Století 1914-1945 [Czechs and Slovaks in the 20th century: 1914-1945] (1997, AEP, Bratislava) p.178.

was done reluctantly under the duress of Germany. Yet, the positive attitude towards the Slovak National Uprising was not as embedded as one would expect. The reason is that during the Communist era it was appropriated by the Communist regime as solely of their own making. The general public inundated with Marxist ideology, thus saw the Uprising more as a fight between two totalitarian regimes rather than as a rebellion of all antifascist forces.

The confusion, contradiction of views and lack of objective information about the wartime Tiso regime and the National Uprising is one of the tarnished legacies of Communism. This lack of historical memory, absence of trusted and respected historical texts about this period available after 1989, had a strong influence on the development of politics in the 1990s. The abundant nationalist literature published after 1989 in Slovakia praising Tiso's regime and dismissing the Uprising as an anti-state putsch, still confuses even some well educated Slovaks.⁸² An objective historical literature dealing with this period had appeared in the 1990s.⁸³

3. Czechoslovakia under Communism and the “Prague Spring”

Czechoslovakia was respected between the World Wars for its democratic tradition, and in 1945 it was reunited and the wartime division was declared void as enforced by Germany. It was not even marked in Jalta in 1945 on the famous napkin

⁸² For Slovak exile literature on Slovak Republic 1939-1945 see bibliography in Stanislav J. Kirschbaum: A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival (1995, Macmillan, London).

⁸³ see texts by Jozef Jablonický, Jan Rychlík, Dušan Kovač and Ľubomír Lipták in the bibliography.

Stalin and Churchill used to envisage the sphere of influences in various countries liberated by the Allies in central and eastern Europe. The Soviet and American Armies had already left in 1945 and Eduard Beneš was reinstated again as the President. There is evidence that until September 1947, Soviets did not intend to incorporate Czechoslovakia into their camp. It was only after the start of the Cold War that the Soviets ordered the popular and strong Czechoslovak Communist Party to take over the key political institutions of the country. The Communist takeover of February 1948 was led by the Premier of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, an old dogmatic Communist who had spent his wartime years in the USSR. His party enjoyed, especially in the Czech part, great popularity not only among workers but among intelligentsia who saw Communist leadership as a bright alternative to democracy. They had lost much hope in the democratic West after Czechoslovakia was betrayed at Munich Treaty and was sold out to Hitler in 1938. Not insignificant was also the fact that most of Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Soviet Army. After some maneuvering, the Communists took over the country in 1948 with the help of the Soviet intelligence officers present in Prague.⁸⁴

Slovakia after the War was more divided and paralyzed than the Czech lands. On the one hand, the supporters of Tiso's regime were fleeing or being persecuted. On the other hand, the leaders of the Slovak National Uprising felt great self-confidence, and saw as natural – even the Communists – that they would be involved in running the country and that nothing should interfere with Slovakia's equal status within Czechoslovakia. The equal status was respected only until the 1947 general elections, when the Communists lost the elections in Slovakia but won in the Czech Republic. The

Communists could not tolerate such disparity and the Slovak Communist leader, Gustav Husák, initiated the recentralization of Slovakia within Czechoslovakia. The Slovak democrats, even those who were against autonomy before the war, protested in vain against this Communist encroachment against Slovak autonomy.⁸⁵

After the Communist takeover in February 1948, trials soon started with mostly Slovak Communist leaders who were leaders of the Slovak Uprising and many were sentenced to death or long prison sentences as so-called "bourgeois nationalists", being, of course, neither. As elsewhere, the Soviets were getting rid of the Communist leaders who were not in the USSR during the war and thus not trusted.⁸⁶ Show trials were orchestrated in every Communist country similar to those staged by Stalin after 1937 in the USSR. The "guilty" confessed that they were capitalist spies and were plotting against the Communist regimes.⁸⁷ The people watching this tirade were shocked but

⁸⁴ Karel Kaplan: Nekrvavá revoluce [A bloodless takeover] (1993, Prague).

⁸⁵ Michal Barnovský: Na ceste k monopolu moci. Mocenskopolitické zápasy na Slovensku v rokoch 1945-1948 [On the road towards monopoly of power: political struggle in Slovakia during 1945-1948] (1993, Bratislava), pp.100-119.

⁸⁶ In all countries of central Europe, except Yugoslavia, where Communists came to power, the Soviets purged the Communist leaders who were partisans in their home countries or were in the West. The reason was that those Communist leaders who were not in the USSR during the War derived their legitimacy from their own action at home or fighting in the West. They were not in their position of power thanks to Stalin's decision and hence might not have been as obedient in the future towards the Soviets as those that were appointed from Moscow. This was the main reason for the clash between Stalin and Yugoslav leader Tito who was immediately after the War Stalin's most trusted Communist leader. After Tito rebelled against Stalin in 1947, Stalin ordered the removal of all satellites' Communist leaders who were not so-called "Moscow Communists". See Milovan Djilas: Conversations with Stalin (1965).

⁸⁷ See Karel Kaplan: Zpráva o zavraždění genrálního tajemníka [Report on the murder of the General Secretary] (1992, Prague); Michal Barnovský ed.: Od diktatury k diktatúre. Slovensko v rokoch 1948-1953 [From dictatorship to dictatorship: Slovakia during 1948-1953] (1995, Bratislava); Arthur London: Doznání [Confession] 2nd ed. (1990, Prague); see also Eugene

mostly believed it. Only after Khrushchev revealed in 1956 that all the political trials were orchestrated and Stalin declared a dictator, did many people have their trust in a bright Communist future shattered. Thus, in the 1960s, it was mainly the Slovak and Czech intellectuals -- who in the 1940s and early 1950s accepted and trusted communism as a viable alternative to capitalism -- who criticized the Communist Party's crimes of the 1950s. This opened the door for the last genuine attempt to reform communism in the 1960s that culminated in the so-called "Prague Spring" that, according to H. Gordon Skilling "was unequaled in the history of communist reform".⁸⁸

Although the reform process in the 1960s flourished in the Czech Republic, it is convincingly argued that it was initiated in Slovakia where the Communists released from prison in the early 1960s were the most outspoken against the Party policies during the early 1950s' trials.⁸⁹ In contrast, at that time the Communist Party in the Czech Republic was more dogmatic and any criticism was banished. The different atmosphere and conditions in Slovakia and the Czech Republic were due also to the structure of the Communist Party. There was no Czech Communist party, only the Czechoslovak and the Slovak Communist Parties.⁹⁰ Slovak Communists, a number of whom were seasoned in

Steiner: The Slovak Dilemma (1973, Cambridge UP, London) esp. Ch.12 on; Jan Rychlík op.cit. 146-169.

⁸⁸ H. Gordon Skilling: Interrupted Revolution (1976, Macmillan. London), p. 824. – A definitive work on the reform movement in 1968 Czechoslovakia; see also R. Selucký: Czechoslovakia: The Plan That Failed (1970, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., London); Galia Golán: The Czechoslovak Reform Movement (1971, Cambridge University Press, London).

⁸⁹ See Vladimir V.Kusin: Intellectual Origin of the Prague Spring (1971, Cambridge UP, London).

⁹⁰ This reflected the Soviet model where there was the Communist Party of the USSR and the Communist Parties in every republic except the Russian Soviet Republic. It was a matter of control where only one center of power could be allowed. Thus it was only a paper federation,

the Uprising during the War, started with the rehabilitation of their colleagues and gradually started to voice criticism that Khrushchev had initiated in 1956. The Slovak Party daily, *Pravda*, and especially its outspoken editor, Miroslav Hysko, wrote articles criticizing the Party - unprecedented elsewhere in Czechoslovakia. After Khrushchev was dismissed in 1964, replaced by the hard-line apparatchik, Leonid Brezhnev, the criticism and reforms in the Soviet Union ended. This event slowed down the reform process in Czechoslovakia but only temporarily. As Skilling observed: "In Czechoslovakia the special intensity of Stalinism and the slowness of de-Stalinization made the outburst of demands for change all the more unrestrained when the dam finally broke in 1968".⁹¹ The forces unleashed in the 1960s could be stopped only by force, as was seen with the invasion of Czechoslovakia by five Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968.

The "Prague Spring" is widely considered to be a political rebellion at the periphery of the Soviet Empire that had consequences for the future of the whole communist system. The reason is that it was the turbulent nine months of 1968 that jolted the monolith of the communist system. It had been, however, argued that the reform of the 1960s in Czechoslovakia was strictly about an attempt by some reform-minded Communist politicians to revive the system. This logically leads to an argument that they had neither the chance nor really the will to reform the system. Politicians and historians in the East or West who stress only the political aspect of the reforms then naturally dismiss it *in toto* as an insincere attempt, a clash of Communist apparatchiks fighting for position and power, using, on this occasion, the mantel of reform to gain the

with no independent centers of power in the Soviet Republics. See Galtung, J.: „The Conflict on a Global Scale: Social Imperialism and Sub-Imperialism – Continuities in the Structural Theory of Imperialism“, In *World Development*, 4:3 (March, 1976).

upper hand. This is, however, a false premise because -- as will be argued later -- the political reform process of 1968 was a culmination, though paradoxically secondary, of the whole reform movement in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. It was an effort that comprised an ideological, cultural and economic revival of the communist doctrine, tainted by Stalinist terror and heralded for its dogmatism. Before the majority of Czech and Slovak politicians noticed and then grudgingly watched, in front of their eyes a sort of "quiet" or "intellectual revolution" had been unleashed during the 1960s initiated by rank and file communist party members -- mostly intellectuals. The latter wished to bury Stalinist legacy that many of them personally helped to promulgate in the 1950s. Their attempt was to reconnect with the ideals of the Social Democratic and Communist parties from before World War Two when these parties at that time were closer to Austro-Marxism than Bolshevism. Hence, parties opened to reforms, intellectual freedom, parliamentarism and economic flexibility. That it was doomed to fail is besides the point, what matters for the purpose of our analysis is that Czechs and Slovaks experienced a taste of freedom and enthusiasm that has been revived several times after 1989.⁹²

⁹¹ Skilling op.cit., pp.824-825.

⁹² Selucký writes: "No country in the world perhaps has ever been so close to a practical fulfillment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as was socialist Czechoslovakia in the first half of 1968.... I have no wish to overlook the differences that existed within our society both in the period after January [1968] and in the days following 21 August [invasion]. But if I consider the speed with which millions of people renewed their allegiance to socialism; the prudence with which they reacted to the revelation of crime and inhumanity committed in the 50s;...the dignity with which the public demonstrated its own will and hopes; and finally the mature and almost statesmanlike wisdom which simple, uninstructed and unorganized people showed in face of the external complications that attended the "Prague Spring" -- then I am far more impressed by the favorable traits in all this, guaranteeing favorable developments to come, than by any disruptive factors such as must accompany any process of social rebirth...." In Czechoslovakia: the Plan that Failed op.cit., pp.136-137.

Let us briefly introduce Alexander Dubček, the symbol of the "Prague Spring", though not the seminal figure of the Czechoslovak reform movement, and for some a reluctant reformer. The election of this unknown apparatchik to the top position of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in January 1968 was an unexpected outcome of the struggle between reformers and conservatives within the communist leadership that was trying to catch up with what was taking place in the whole society. Certainly, a number of Party leaders who had been in power since 1950s did not wish Dubček to allow the reforms to change the political status quo of Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, several high ranking Party officials, like Čestmír Cisař, Jaromír Kriegel, Jozef Smrkovský, Miroslav Kusý or Radoslav Selucký, were themselves intellectuals or supporters of the reform movement. Although they supported the reform process throughout 1968 more than other politicians, they had no political goals in mind while blessing the reforms or electing the new General Secretary of the Party. The reason for Alexander Dubček's rise to power was more complex.

As has already been stated, Dubček was a compromise and, in a way, an accidental choice for the top job in January 1968. Not being directly involved in the Communist apparat's infighting throughout 1967, he was the least offensive choice for all factions. He was the son of a middle-ranking Party apparatchik who was known for his altruism. The whole family moved in the 1930s to the Soviet Union – as did many Western communist idealists – to help build the "first country of Socialism". Young Dubček grew up in the Soviet Union and subsequently often stressed his affection for the Soviet people and the country. As a Party apparatchik in Slovakia, he never showed a hint of resistance to the Party line. His climb up the Party ladder was not marked by any

ruthless behavior and he was not known for any radical or dogmatic views. Dubček was unknown even within Slovakia before he became the Communist Party leader. Yet he became a hero overnight in 1968 thanks to his mild and unimposing manners and pragmatism, a quality contrasting with his predecessors. Skilling writes in this respect: "Dubček was a leader of a different stamp, listening sympathetically to the advice of the reformers around him and acting in a human and democratic manner uncharacteristic of communist rulers".⁹³ However, he was never an initiator of changes and reforms. From the beginning, he was only catching up with what the society was gradually drifting towards.⁹⁴ At the same time, he did little to fulfill Soviet hopes to halt the reformers. However, it must be said that even if he had wished, he had no strength to stop the whole process. Also, it is evident that he did not realize the danger the country was exposed to. Again Skilling argues that Dubček failed "to comprehend that his reform program could not be reconciled with friendship and alliance with the USSR and the bloc, and that military action by his so-called allies was a real possibility".⁹⁵

To sum up, Dubček's legacy can be described as of a political leader who was a decent human being with no political vision, no burning political ambition and neither resolute temper. This indecisiveness was his trademark that was often viewed as strategy to support the reform, while still paying lip service to Soviet concerns. The Soviets

⁹³ Skilling, H.G.: "Lions or Foxes: Heroes or Lackeys?" in H.G.Skilling Ed.: Czechoslovakia 1918-1988: Seventy Years from Independence (1990, MacMillan, London), p.10.

⁹⁴ As Skilling writes: "Dubček did seek to moderate the reform course and to conciliate the Russians....His insistence on the leading role of the party; his condemnation of anti-socialist forces; and his constant asseveration of his loyalty to the Soviet bloc, were examples of his effort in this direction"Interrupted Revolution... op.cit., p.844.

⁹⁵ ibid.

noticed this trait of Dubček's and wrote him off as early as April or May 1968. As will be shown in the next chapter, after the invasion they discovered a mirror opposite of Dubček in an ambitious and shrewd fellow Slovak, Gustav Husák who was put in charge of extinguishing the reform movement after 1969.

Let us return to discuss the true initiators and actors of the reform process in the 1960s. They were not politicians who came into the limelight after 1968. The main proponents of this reform were mostly intellectuals, writers and journalists grouped in artistic circles in Bratislava, Prague and Brno. The political manifestation of this reform process in 1968 was a result or consequence of this intellectual and artistic explosion or as one author called it "an intellectual revolution".⁹⁶ It was the culmination of almost a decade-long attempt of reform of that system which seems in retrospect unreformable. Politicians could only follow in their footsteps, and try to slow down or even stop that which was unstoppable through peaceful means.⁹⁷ Even open-minded high ranking Party officials were reluctantly absorbing the opinions and the way of thinking of writers such as Milan Kundera, Dominik Tatárka, Ludvík Vaculík, Ladislav Mňačko, Juraj Špitzer and many others. These intellectuals were all Communist Party members in the 1950s and their aim in the 1960s was a genuine attempt to undo their mistakes and repair

⁹⁶ This was a phrase put forth by a Slovak politician Evžen Löbl as quoted by Skilling. Skilling adds: "only in Czechoslovakia, as a result of deep crisis, had the intelligentsia actually assumed this leading role and become [according to Löbl] "a tremendous political power." Interrupted Revolution *ibid.* p. 832-833. See also Vladimír V. Kusín: Political Grouping in the Czechoslovak Reform Movement (1972, Columbia University Press, N.Y.).

⁹⁷ Skilling quotes a Prime Minister of that time who called it "a revolt without theory" and adds that it was, "in the sense that the new leadership [in January 1968] did not know what they wanted". Skilling *ibid.* p. 826.

what they had betrayed in their youth. They did not openly call for a change in the Communist regime. However, their call to abolish censorship and to scrutinize the regime's excesses in the 1950s was the demand that undermined the basic structure of the regime. As intellectuals in general, they refused to calculate and compromise once they were on their track to stamp a totalitarian system with human dignity. Gradually, they feared less and less the consequences of their deeds having behind them masses of supporters and admirers who hoped to create in the country of Masaryk, Švejk and Kafka, a more humane society than what they had experienced in the 1950s. The later-coined expression, "Socialism with a human face", does not really convey their attempt to 'humanize' socialism but to make it what in their opinion Marxist theory really stood for. They were stretching the boundaries of feasibility without trying to devise the limits beyond which they would not go. In this respect they were naïve, but this type of naiveté pushes and improves the human condition and sets the standard of heroism.⁹⁸

Let us in conclusion ponder over a more general hypothetical question: were the reformers in Czechoslovakia naïve, or was there a chance to reform the Communist system? Surely, in retrospect, we can say that the reform in the periphery of the Communist system did not have a chance to succeed until the center had cracked. The revival was of a spiritual nature that, however, had no chance to be solidified in an enduring political reform. This is reflected in Skilling's assessment when he concluded

⁹⁸ Radoslav Selucký, a politician, intellectual and economist who was among the leading reformers in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, has this to say about the admirable and rather naïve goals and hopes of the reformers in 1968: "If I were asked to summarize the chief aims of the post-January [1968] social reforms movement, I would say that we were trying to achieve a positive, humane and socialist victory over capitalism....For the first time in history we wanted to make the humanist creed an everyday reality, unfettered by class rivalries or bureaucratic tyranny. *Op.cit.*, p. 135.

that, "the Prague experiment seemed doomed to failure for external reasons rather than inherent domestic ones".⁹⁹ The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Treaty armies in August 1968 proved that the communist system was unwilling to experiment with reforms. We can also state that the system was hardly reformable in the midst of the Cold war and with the Party politicians whose legitimacy and power had been established during the Stalin era, as was the case in Czechoslovakia or in any other Communist country. Czech philosopher and critic of the 1968 reforms, Ivan Sviták, distinguished between true "democracy" and "democratization" of totalitarian dictatorship as was the case in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and he doubted that the latter had chance to succeed in transforming itself into a genuine democracy. Sviták emphatically stated that it was like squaring the circle and "round squares do not exist".¹⁰⁰ The Communist system could not be reformed, only dismantled. Mikhail Gorbachev in Russia manifested this with a similar attempt in the 1980s. Fortunately the USSR was the center, and once Moscow was unwilling to intervene in its satellites, the communist system collapsed in central Europe and eventually in the USSR.

Yet, the consideration of the question whether the reforms could succeed in the 1960s is important due to the sincerity and achievements of the reformers in Czechoslovakia and the impact it subsequently had on the whole Soviet bloc. It also initiated a new era in the West among Western intellectuals who, before 1968, had put hopes into the Communist project. In retrospect, the immediate trauma of occupation for Czechs and Slovaks was horrendous and, at the time, no preceding cultural revival could

⁹⁹ Interrupted Revolution op.cit. p.834.

¹⁰⁰ ibid. p. 831.

compensate their sorrow and human degradation while powerlessly facing the occupying troops. What was important, meaningful and significant was the release of creative energy, which produced art of exquisite value rarely matched before then and not matched since then. It infected the thinking of the next generations in the region and, in retrospect, buried the Communist system as a viable intellectual alternative to liberal democracies in the West. Skilling concluded in 1976 his magisterial analysis of the reform movement in Czechoslovakia with these words:¹⁰¹

The year 1968...was a time of greatness, both in aims and accomplishment, and undoubtedly will remain embedded in the historical consciousness of the two nations....In that sense, 1968 will remain an inspiration and in some degree a guide for the future, and the revolution will perhaps be resumed, but under changed conditions and in new forms that cannot now be known.

Indeed, the resistance to the communist regime in Poland in the early 1980s or the attempts of reformers in Hungary and the USSR later in the 1980s were, to a certain degree, responses to the goals and hopes of the reformers in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s.

The crushed 1968 reform movement was significant for the last two decades of the Communist era that followed, and indirectly extended its influence on the post-communist era as well. The whole generation of Slovaks who were lukewarm towards the question of democratization in 1968, but vehement about achieving equal status for Slovakia, were crushed by the regime that came after 1969. They withdrew from public life and remained silent until 1989. After the collapse of Communism in November 1989, a number of them were eager to re-enter public life and a great number of them in a society lacking a dissident elite, as was the case in the Czech Republic, received prominent positions in the first post-communist government. They were not eager

reformers in the 1960s, and then two decades of isolation and silence in the 1970s and 1980s did not predispose them to stand in the forefront of building of democracy and economic transformation. Neither did they feel comfortable in the company of former Czech dissidents, nor could they find common language with the new, younger generation of Slovak leaders who were not directly affected by the trauma of 1950s and 1960s. These reluctant reformers from 1968 remained, in their outlook, reform communists – inflexible and even dogmatic in their thinking. They were vulnerable because they all had their skeletons in the closet for their activities before 1968 and hence were afraid to be swept away by the wave of anti-communism that was in the air – however, that never materialized – after 1989 in Slovakia. Not surprisingly, many of them found refuge in a dogma different in nature, but similar in shape and rigidity – nationalism. A number of these “68-ers”, as they were contemptuously called, became the most trusted allies of a populist rising star – Vladimír Mečiar.¹⁰² Hence, a large number of them supported the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993 as a delayed satisfaction for the failure in 1968. Interestingly, Alexander Dubček, the symbol of the Prague Spring who tragically died in 1993, was vehemently against nationalists, Mečiar and the break-up of Czechoslovakia. However, in 1990 he was instrumental in promoting into Slovak politics a great number of his former colleagues who subsequently became separatists. Decent and courageous though he was, Dubček remained after 1989 a man of

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p. 852.

¹⁰² Fedor Gál, a prominent political figure after 1989 recalled in a discussion of the early developments in Slovakia after 1989 how a number of “68-ers”, among them the future President of Slovakia, Michal Kováč, knew about the populist and demagogic policies of Mečiar, and yet joined him to build a new party. As will be shown in Chapter V., Kováč later became an enemy of nationalist and populists, but the fact remains that his experience in 1968 set him to become

yesteryears, never fully grasping the scope of changes that 1989 brought to his society. Thus, though respected, he did not become a unifying figure as was the case of Václav Havel in the Czech Republic.

Review

In this chapter we outlined the main historical elements that affected the state of political culture after 1989. The relationship towards Czechs and the Hungarian minority was determined through this difficult and complex historical evolution in the territory of present-day Slovakia. Thanks to the little attention paid to these problems during the communist era and hence the little objective information available, Slovak society was not able to handle the issue of coexistence with the Czechs after 1989. In the midst of confusion and ethnic stereotypes, those politicians who promoted ethnic tension received much greater support than those politicians who promoted peaceful coexistence with the Czechs and Hungarians. This state of disarray eventually led to the break-up of Czechoslovakia and caused ethnic tension vis-a-vis the Hungarian minority after 1993 in the independent Slovakia. Yet the brief historical excursion showed that, besides stereotypical views of history, there were two periods of Slovak history that must have left a positive mark in the consciousness of its citizens – the democratic Czechoslovak Republic 1918-1938 and the reform years in the 1960s. These two periods, to a certain degree, influenced political culture in Slovakia after 1989 in general and in 1998 in particular. The reforms in the 1960s in particular remained in the memory of a large proportion of the population who, in 1989, was welcoming the collapse of the Communist regime.

initially a separatist. See Ingrid Antalová: Verējnost' proti násiliu [Public against violence 1989-1991] (1998, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Bratislava) p.208.

Chapter III

Towards November 1989 and the Break-up of Czechoslovakia

Overview

This chapter will outline the origin and implementation of illiberal democracy in Slovakia. It covers the last two decades of the communist regime that had the greatest impact on political culture after 1989, and will also describe the first years of transition period heading towards the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993. The different developments in Slovakia and the Czech Republic after 1969, it will be argued, had substantial influence on the political process, which evolved in both societies after 1989. This chapter also considers how Slovak society was surprised by, and to a certain degree unable to digest, the fall of the Communist regime, and how the legacy of the Communist regime influenced the course of transition. During the period 1989-1992 Slovakia went through political radicalization as well as substantial social and economic deterioration. Finally, a specific legacy, namely the Secret Police files, will be presented as one of the key factor contributing to the radicalization of politics and the establishment of illiberal democracy in Slovakia.

Introduction

It might seem unusual to present in one chapter a period starting with the onset of “Normalization” period in 1969, the fall of the Communist regime in November 1989 and three years of post-Communist transformation heading towards the break-up of the common state of Czech and Slovak in 1992. It might seem as a more appropriate division to assess the last two decades of the Communist regime, from 1969-1989 and culminating in the fall of the Communist regime during the so-called Velvet revolution of 1989. Then a separate analysis would be of the post-communist transformation, beginning with the installation of a democratic government, and the rule of law leading to

the break-up of Czechoslovakia. However, as it was argued in Chapter I, political culture changes much slower than political structure. Whereas the latter altered radically with the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, the former did not. An additional factor was played by the fact that the political culture in Slovakia and the Czech Republic differed substantially. Indeed, the state of political culture, as a heritage of the Communist era, had immense impact on the way the post-communist transformation evolved in both societies. I would argue that this difference significantly contributed to the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993.

The fall of the Communist regime in 1989 ended a decades long period of an enforced regime that crumbled under the pressure of its own incompetence, inflexibility and ruthlessness. To be sure, this fall of Czechoslovakia was a direct consequence of an unsuccessful attempt by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union to revive the obsolete system and, in turn, initiated a domino effect in all Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Without this process in the USSR, Czechoslovakia had neither much hope nor energy nor the will to initiate the end of the dreaded Communist rule. Another question is to what extent this society was able to handle such a major systemic change once the Communist regime had disintegrated.

As opposite to Polish, Hungarian and, to a certain degree, Czech societies, Slovak society was least prepared for the fall of the Communist regime. The legacy of Communist political culture affected Slovakia more than any of these central European societies. The Communist regime in the last two decades of its rule managed to demoralize the Slovak society to such an extent that, after 1989, it was politically and intellectually unprepared to absorb and preserve the main attributes of liberal-democratic

society. One reason was that there were simply no legitimate leaders strong enough to implement necessary steps after the Communist leaders retreated without much resistance. Those that were jettisoned to the top were a spectrum of individuals reflecting a profile of that paralyzed society: former communists, members of the dreaded State Security Police,¹⁰³ together with intellectuals and artists. The latter two were soon forced out of power by populists and nationalists who were often former communists, or simply turn-coat democrats. The society at this stage simply did not produce or discouraged political elite that would guide the society to a democratic and liberal regime. The result was a radical deterioration of democracy, and a rise of populists and nationalists who first precipitated the break-up of Czechoslovakia, in parallel with the rise of illiberal democracy in Slovakia.

To sum up, the reasons for the scope of the present chapter where the period of 1969-1992 constitutes one unit, is to comprehend the causes for and the mechanism of unexpected imposition of illiberal democracy in Slovakia. A continuum that manifested itself during the first years of transformation after 1989 as a culmination of the legacy of the Communist regime. Thus to understand the reasons for the breakdown of democratization in Slovakia after 1989 and the break-up of Czechoslovakia, which is the topic of the next chapter, we have to look for their origin to the last two decades of Communist rule in Slovakia.

¹⁰³ ŠtB (Štátna bezpečnosť) [State Security Police] – Czechoslovak secret police whose main task in the 1970s and 1980s was to extinguish the real or potential opposition of the Communist regime.

1. "Normalization" Period 1969-1989: Different Developments in Slovakia and the Czech Republic after 1969

The invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 represents a turning point in the history of the entire Communist system. The illusion that these regimes were reformable evaporated even among those who had put great hopes into this modern millenarian project – at least in its Marxist-Leninist garb. A whole generation of Communist intellectuals lost hope of building a system where political equality coexists with economic and social justice. All aspirations or ideals of the communist project were dashed beyond repair after the imposition of the "Brezhnev Doctrine" which essentially deprived its satellites of sovereignty. The millions of citizens who lived within the Soviet bloc became victims of a system whose sole aim was its preservation and expansion. What followed in the 1970s and 1980s, was the maintenance of crude force by the Party apparatchiks.

Czechoslovakia, especially after its reform process in the 1960s was halted, experienced the deepest plunge and relatively the worst deterioration of its political condition. The two decades of Normalization 1969-1989 represent one of the gloomiest periods of Czech and Slovak history. The powers-that-be no longer provided vision but a contract; the option was emigration, silence, cooperation or rebellion. It is estimated that between 1968-1969 one million people emigrated from Czechoslovakia. An even larger number were expelled from the Communist Party and went into internal exile and tried to escape the faustian trap offered by the Communist regime. This silence of the vast majority of the population had a negative impact on the overall political culture. A great number of individuals were direct executor and a still greater number cooperated to a

various degree with the regime. The infamous State Security Police (ŠtB) that, to the last moment of the regime's existence, intimidated and harassed anyone it chose supervised the insidious contract between the regime and society. There was a tiny group of rebels, so-called dissidents, who refused to cooperate with the regime and refused to be silent. That this group was significantly smaller in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic had a great impact on the different unfolding of the "Normalization" period 1969-1989 in both republics.

In order to understand the structure and mechanism of operation of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia before the "Velvet Revolution" in November 1989, we have to examine the development during the period of "Normalization" of 1969-1989.¹⁰⁴ It is also an important period in order to understand the development after the fall of the Communist regime. Not only because it directly precedes the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, but mainly because, first, its features were so radical and oppressive and, second, the events evolved differently in both republics during this period. The purges within the Communist Party took place in the Czech Republic and Slovakia; however, the outcome was different in both of these republics.

Let us review the reform process of the 1960s which predetermined developments in both republics during the period of "Normalization". During the late 1960s, as it was mentioned, artists, journalists and intellectuals in general fueled acerbic debates that

¹⁰⁴ The term "Normalization" emerged immediately after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 in the proclamation called "Moscow Protocol" which the Czechoslovak leadership, kidnapped to the Soviet Union, was forced to sign. They promised to "normalize", i.e., stabilize conditions in Czechoslovakia following their return to Prague. In practice it meant the gradual removal of reforms initiated in the 1960s, immediate censorship of the media, elimination of protagonists and supporters of reforms and legalisation of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Jan Rychlík: Češi a Slováci ve 20. Století: Česko-slovenské vztahy 1945-1992 [the Czechs and

shook the regime's foundations. Also, after Dubček's ascent to power in January 1968, the ensuing political turmoil, if unchecked, would, no doubt, subvert the Communist regime. The Communist nomenclature that had ruled the country since 1948 suddenly had to accept, even compete with, reformers standing outside politics who had been the engine of the reforms in the sixties and had initiated the democratization process. The general public was an eager observer and predominantly a supporter of reform, but, by and large, a passive partner of the reformers. This position changed radically after the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact armies.¹⁰⁵ To the great surprise of the invaders who expected passivity from the population, streets all over the country were filled with indignant masses who offered passive resistance to the massive military force.

The Soviet leaders in August 1968 abducted the Czechoslovak leadership to the USSR and hoped to install the so-called "Revolutionary-Workers government" composed of a minority of the old Communist apparatchiks. This plan failed thanks to the continuous resistance of the population that kept demanding the return and reinstatement of Dubček's leadership. In these conditions, no one from the designated "Revolutionary-Workers government" dared to step forward and replace the popular Dubček government.¹⁰⁶ The initial unity of the outraged general public caused that the

Slovaks in the 20th century: the Czech-Slovak relationship 1945-1992] (1998, AEP, Bratislava) p. 252.

¹⁰⁵ The invasion was mainly by the Soviet Army supported by much smaller East German, Polish, Hungarian and Bulgarian contingents. Only Romania -- also a member of the Warsaw Pact -- refused to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

¹⁰⁶ The group that supposedly sent an "invitation letter" in 1968 to save Czechoslovakia against "the contra-revolutionary forces" was viewed with such indignation after the invasion that even after full restoration of the orthodox Communist rule during the 1970s and 1980s when a number

leadership was returned back to Czechoslovakia.¹⁰⁷ However, already during the sojourn of Dubček's government in the USSR, the Soviet leaders counted on an agreeable fellow, Gustav Husák, who more than others was willing to compromise and cooperate. He was also instrumental in designing the regime, as will become clear in the next chapter, that followed after the invasion of 1968.

Husák, a lawyer by trade, and considered an intellectual, became a victim of Stalinist trials in the early 1950s. This was not an unusual fate for a communist politician who during the war advocated the incorporation of Slovakia into the USSR and helped the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia to takeover power in 1948. As one who was a most ruthless executor of the Communist regime after 1948, he was caught to his dismay in the churning Stalin machine. He was not one of the "Moscow Communists" who had been in the Soviet Union during the War and were then put into a position of power in various central European countries. According to the Soviet stratagem the most loyal and reliable were only those Communist leaders whose position was thanks to the Soviets and not legitimately derived from their actions at home. Husák was active in Slovakia during the war and even his most ardent declaration of loyalty did not save him from imprisonment. In 1951, he was among the sentenced Communist leaders, all of whom, except him, were hanged. He managed to delay his death sentence because he withdrew

of them were back in power, they did not dare admit to being a part of this "Workers government". In fact, not until the 1990s was it clear who exactly sent it, or whether at all such a letter was sent. The Russians provided a copy of text and signatures after being requested to do so by the Czech government in 1993. One of the signatories and a most prominent anti-reformer, Vasil Biľak, even then refused to admit that he had signed such a letter. (Based on personal communication with Juraj Lihosit, a Slovak filmmaker who produced a documentary on this topic in 1998.)

¹⁰⁷ The only person who refused to sign the "Moscow Protocol" was František Kriegel. See Jan Rychlík: *op.cit.*, p. 252.

his confession and had to be further interrogated. He was the only one who defied the authorities despite the fact that the torture must have been excruciating. These delay saved his life. He survived in prison until Stalin's death in 1953 and his "guilt" was 'appraised' for twenty years in prison. He was released among other so-called "bourgeois nationalists" in 1959, but left prison as convinced a Communist as he was when he entered it. As many others sentenced in the 1950s, he believed that it was not the Party that was mistaken and guilty, but the misguided individuals. Again, as many of his ilk, he wanted the Communist Party to be brought to the pristine purity of the Marxist-Leninist ideal. He also represented a trait in Slovak politics that typified those reformed Communists who stressed federation before democratization in 1968.

Husák played a crucial role in breaking the unity of Dubček's leadership and crushing the resistance of the population following August 1968. At the outset, he was a proponent of compromise with the Soviets, yet presented himself as a guarantor of at least certain reforms achieved in 1968. He claimed that his main goal was to bring to a successful conclusion the process of the federalization of Czech and Slovak Republics. His assistance to the occupying forces was significant because it would be difficult for the Soviets to find a figure acceptable to the public. If the designated "Revolutionary-Workers government" lacked any legitimacy, Husák was a relatively popular figure who was in the forefront of reforms in the 1960s, and both before and several months after the invasion presented himself as a reformer. As H.G. Skilling assessed Husák's role in 1968:¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ H. Gordon Skilling: "Lions or Foxes: Heroes or Lackeys?" In H.G. Skilling ed.: Czechoslovakia 1918-88: Seventy Years from Independence (1990, Macmillan, Oxford) p. 9.

After the Soviet occupation, by shrewd maneuvering, Husák made himself the favoured choice of Brezhnev for the succession to Dubček and carried out the former's wishes in eliminating every vestige of the 1968 reforms except the formal structure of federation. Although in August 1968 he had condemned the Soviet invasion, he pursued a policy of totally subordinating Czechoslovakia to the Soviet Union.

The signing of the document of Czechoslovak federation in November 1968, three months after the invasion, was a concession the occupying forces allowed, undoubtedly to please Husák and his Slovak allies.¹⁰⁹

Only Husák, someone with a certain degree of popularity and legitimacy, could impose so quickly such a calamitous regime in Czechoslovakia. The result was political repression and a general demoralization of the population. After high hopes for the reforms in the summer of 1968 and a grand national unity lasting several months after the August invasion, a stunned population found itself in a stultifying atmosphere where the invasion by the Warsaw Pact armies was officially hailed as the saviour of socialism in Czechoslovakia. As a logical outcome, the Czechoslovak federation had been curtailed by 1971. As H G. Skilling writes: "[Husák] was largely responsible for the creation of the creation of a federal system and a Slovak Republic in 1968, but had no compunction, as first secretary, in whittling down Slovak autonomy and subordinating Bratislava once again to Prague where he was supreme".¹¹⁰ Thus after his inauguration in April 1969 as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, what followed was the rapid demise of reforms, the removal from power of progressive politicians and the imposition of a regime that far exceeded pre-1968 conditions. A prominent Czech

¹⁰⁹ See Rychlík *Op. Cit* for a general overview of Czechoslovak federalization pp. 213-270; specifically regarding Husák's role in this process pp. 257-270.

historian, Vilém Prečan, argued that Husák not only did everything the Soviets required, in fact, in certain aspects he did more than the Soviets hoped for.¹¹¹ The former arch federalist Gustáv Husák presided over the process of "Normalization" and remained in power during the following two decades.

2. The onset of "Normalization" Period

The old Communist guard that had been marginalised in the 1960s and ousted in January 1968, gradually came back to power after 1969. As revenge, they purged the reformers in the Party and marginalised a whole generation of reformers. "The restoration of socialist order" or "Normalization" following the end of the reform process which initiated during the Prague Spring of 1968 was imposed by four features of this new Communist social contract: bribery, threat, force and economic-political trade-offs. Many Czech and Slovak citizens who refused to sign a declaration that they condoned the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 were expelled from the Communist Party and/or were forced to resign from their professional positions. Many others, threatened and disillusioned, emigrated. However, the vast majority, too afraid or apathetic to resist, accepted the bribe of relative consumer prosperity in exchange for passive acceptance of the burial of the 1968 reforms.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ "Gustáv Husák prezidentem" [G.Husák as the President] published in Prečan, V.: V kradeném čase: Výběr ze studií, článků a úvah z let 1973-1993 [Essays from studies, articles from 1973- 1993: from the time being lost] (1994, USD, Prague) p. 155.

¹¹² An excellent study of „Normalization“ is Milan Šimečka: The Restoration of Order (1984, Verso Editions, London) and Vladimír V. Kusín: From Dubček to Charter 77 (1978, St. Martin

Although taking place in the same country, the dynamics of Normalization in the Czech Republic and Slovakia showed several distinct features. The purge in the Czech Republic after 1969 brought a substantial turnover of the elite within political and administrative structures. The division and alienation between the Communist regime and society became wide and clear. The unwritten rule in the Czech Republic was that whoever joined the regime by becoming a member of the Party to achieve social mobility, was conscious of the contempt with which he or she was regarded by the rest of society. The Czech Republic from the beginning of the 1960s was a more divided society, and the purges after 1969 were far more comprehensive than in Slovakia, where, as will be explained, the division and animosity among reform and non-reform Communists was not as pronounced.¹¹³ A great number of those purged from the Party in the Czech Republic were not only forced out for two decades from their professional position, but were often forced to earn their living doing manual work. The old guard in power in the Czech Republic made sure that no repentance, no "change of heart" would allow the return to public or political life of those who were in favour of reforms in the 1960s¹¹⁴. The majority of expelled or side-tracked non-party members, except for a small minority, retired into internal exile and remained passive throughout the period of "Normalization". The Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, backed by the Soviet Union, was doing as much as it could to preserve this general compliance. It must be

Press, New York); see also J. Rupnick: "The restoration of the Party-State in Czechoslovakia since 1968" in The Withering Away of the State (1981, Saga Publ. London) pp.105-24.

¹¹³ Rychlík op.cit. -- see the section on different evolution of purges in the Czech Republic and Slovakia after 1969; pp. 280-282.

said that there were limits to the repression of the population, and there was no return of the draconian purges of the 1950s. Instead, as an exchange for silence and passivity, the regime provided relative economic prosperity and social security. The deal was no harassment of the majority, and prosperity in return for silence and compliance.¹¹⁵

There was, however, a group in the Czech Republic that refused to bargain with the Communist regime. The resistance was first individual and thus not very effective. However, after Czechoslovakia signed the Helsinki Accord on Human Rights in 1976, a group of individuals issued an open proclamation asking Husák's regime to follow its signed pledge to observe human rights. The Document issued was called "Charter 77", and its signatories were coined "dissidents" by the regime. They pledged that they were to monitor and publish the acts of Husák's regime that violated human rights. Resisting to call themselves dissidents – a term that they found to be narrow in its scope and somehow negative – they defined themselves as "underground" or "second culture", "independent society" or "Parallel Polis". They were, in the words of Ivan Jirous, resolute not to be "dependent on official channels of communication, or on the hierarchy of values of the establishment".¹¹⁶ Václav Benda perceived the activities of the "Parallel Polis" as even greater in scope than, according to Skilling, "embraced an uncensored

¹¹⁴ Ján Mlinárik: "Stalinov návrat – normalizácia (1969-1971)" [Stalin's return – Normalization: 1969-1971] In *Slovenské rozhlady* 8/1996 p. 83.

¹¹⁵ Czech society, although an unforgiving society, was also a quiet and unrebelling one, with no brave gestures of defiance against the regime. "Svejkian" humour, covert contempt for the regime, and general alienation were the rules for survival during the Normalization period.

¹¹⁶ H. Gordon Skilling in the introduction to a questionnaire by prominent Czech dissidents "Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry" In *Social Research*, 55:1-2 (Spring/Summer 1998) p. 212.

information system, popular music, unofficial education and scholarship, and the second, or black-market, economy".¹¹⁷ Their seemingly logical demands in the midst of "Normalization" was qualified as an act of treason by the Communist regime -- of breaking the enforced contract of silence and passivity. A wave of anti-"Charter 77" campaigns followed, and the permanent repression of this small group thus began.¹¹⁸ It commenced a new era of Czechoslovak politics and the confrontation caused by the Charter 77 signatories had significant consequences for the subsequent last twelve years of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. The dissidents kept monitoring the regime's human rights record and provided a ray of hope for the rest of the population. The Czech dissidents, few in number, certainly kept the flame of freedom burning, but with no opportunity or even hope of spreading that flame. Yet they sensed their location in the society. As prophetically Milan Šimečka remarked in 1987:¹¹⁹

The "Independent society" is so far kept at a safe distance from the "masses". If, however, the crisis of the system in the Eastern Europe continues, if economic stagnation deepens and political demoralization increases, these "independent societies" will remain the only source of hope for a new beginning, and the only social formation that will be able to demonstrate moral integrity and an ability to come to terms with the present.

Indeed, when the Communist regime crumbled, thanks to student resistance in November 1989, the dissidents led by Václav Havel, were naturally designated as successors of the Communist leaders. A radically different development evolved in Slovakia during the period of "Normalization".

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Prečan op.cit., pp.212-219.

3. Slovakia and the Legacy of Communism¹²⁰

The different aims and expectations of the Slovak reformers as opposed to their Czech colleagues during the Prague Spring, where the former focused more on federalization than democratization, produced a different aftermath in each republic. The main demand of a number of Slovak reformers in 1968 -- Czechoslovak federation -- was accomplished. Despite the suppression of the democratization process, Slovaks hailed at least the attainment of a federation, and vainly hoped that this would protect them from the encroachment of the Communist regime. The logic behind this naive belief was that Slovak Communist rulers would be better, more understanding of things Slovak than those who had been ruling from Prague. However, as was the case with any Communist regime, it could be ruled only from one center¹²¹ – thus by definition anti-federalist – and by 1971 had curbed substantially the powers of the Slovak Communist Party. In addition, the Federal Constitution of 1968, as any communist constitution, was not binding for the Communist Party leaders and thus remained only a fiction. By the time the hollow nature of the Communist-designed federation became clear to many Slovaks, they found it was too late to opt out. Their bondage to the regime was too strong.

A different unfolding of events in Slovakia meant that, on the surface, “Normalization” in Slovakia had a less stormy development. The division and distance

¹¹⁹ Skilling “Paralle Polis....” op.cit. p. 226.

¹²⁰ This section draws on my unpublished M.A. Thesis: Survival of a Besieged Society: Czechoslovak Normalization 1969-1989, Carleton University, Ottawa, 1990.

¹²¹ See Johan Galtung “Conflict on a Global Scale: Social Imperialism and Sub-Imperialism – Continuities in the Structure Theory of Imperialism” *World Development*, 4:3 (March,1976), pp.159-161.

between those who were in the Communist Party and those who were not or were expelled was not as sharp as in the Czech Republic.¹²² Thus a far greater proportion of Slovaks who were politically active in the 1960s were gradually co-opted into the political and administrative structures after 1969. Even those expelled from the Party were not automatically degraded to manual work.¹²³ In particular, many prominent cultural figures and other intellectuals who would have been purged relentlessly in the Czech Republic, maintained or acquired clerical or administrative posts, often unrelated to their profession, instead of being forced to the margin of society as was the case of many Czech intellectuals.¹²⁴ Even though there were widespread purges of thousands of Communists in Slovakia and the existential persecution of many others, in many cases the doors were left slightly open for those expelled from the Party to make a comeback. This relative degree of upward mobility was tempting, and often accepted by a number of educated Slovaks. The price was, of course, the humiliating confession of approval of "international assistance", i.e. the invasion, brought by the Warsaw Pact armies. This conscience-breaking measure - endured by many Slovaks - while in the short-term advantageous, in the long term caused an even greater "Biafra of the soul" in Slovakia

¹²² Mlynárik, op.cit. p.84.

¹²³ Rychlík op.cit., p.281.

¹²⁴ The prominent Slovak writer, Lubomír Feldek, asserts that many of his colleagues joined the Communist Party in the 1970s in order to preserve the reform spirit within the party. They hoped that their friend, the Minister of Culture, Miroslav Válek, would have enough power to salvage some democratic reforms. Gradually they realized how powerless Válek was, and how little they could do to stop the most hostile communists from suppressing any political discourse. The result was bitterness and alienation often drowned in alcohol. [based on Personal communication].

than in the Czech Republic.¹²⁵ In addition, a great number of Slovak intellectuals, those that had succumbed to the pressure and lure of the Communist regime, were often co-opted into the network of State Security Police agents and informers -- a factor that became greatly important after 1989 as will be debated later.

It was not only a matter of the different impact of federalization and purges, but also with respect to economic development that differences existed between the Slovak and Czech republics. Historically, as has been mentioned, the Czech lands were economically more advanced than Slovakia. Rapid industrialization of Slovakia during the Communist era narrowed the gap between the two republics, yet, the narrowing was only of quantitative and not qualitative nature. The reasons for this economic policy towards Slovakia were several, ranging from strategic to political. First, it was simply a continuation, starting after the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, of greater attention to Slovakia that had, historically, a much weaker economy than the industrially developed Czech lands. Second, the production of heavy armament industry, traditionally based in Western parts of the Czech Republic, was shifted in the 1960s and 1970s for strategic reasons to Slovakia in the east. This resulted in a strong economic boost to central Slovakia, traditionally the least developed region. Finally, Husák's regime, partially in compensation for lost federal jurisdiction of Slovakia and partially as a reward for adapting well to the ideologically vacuous and politically rigid Communist regime, supported Slovakia from the federal budget.

In any case, the rate of economic growth throughout the 1970s and 1980s was relatively higher in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. The standard of living in both

¹²⁵ French writer L. Aragon coined the term "The Biafra of the souls" for Czechoslovakia in 1969.

republics was, for the first time in Czecho-Slovak history, comparable. However, as Radoslav Selucký observed in 1988:¹²⁶

Because industrialization in Slovakia followed the Soviet pattern which, in turn, followed the pattern of capitalist industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth century (that is metallurgy, heavy engineering, chemicals, and so on), the net result was that Slovakia acquired an obsolete branch structure with obsolete technology quite out of place in the second half of the twentieth century....Its equalization with the Czech lands, although initially viewed as an enormous economic success, has been a relative success at best.

In fact, Selucký continues, the Czech Republic actually benefited by escaping Communist industrialization on such a scale.¹²⁷ The short-lived material prosperity of Slovakia also resulted in environmental devastation, the cost of which has to be carried by the post-communist governments. To be sure, this macroeconomic bribe by the Communist regime made Slovak society more placid, gradually more content and desiring a change of regime less than the discontented Czech society. In this respect, by preventing any rebellion from emerging from within, the Communist regime succeeded in pacifying Slovak society despite its eventual fall in 1989.

4. Demoralized Slovak Society

The result of Slovak "Normalization" was less pronounced stratification of Slovak society than one would expect under such an oppressive regime. A number of prominent Slovak politicians, who were neither reformers nor members of the reactionary old Communist guard from the 1960s, remained in power after 1969 and helped their former

¹²⁶Radoslav Selucký "From Capitalism to Socialism" in H.Gordon Skilling ed.: Czechoslovakia 1918-1988: Seventy Years from Independence (1991, Macmillan, Oxford) p.167.

colleagues expelled from the Communist Party and downgraded from their professional position. As Czech historian, Jan Rychlík, writes: "the former federalists [from 1968] who later remained in position of power... tried as much as they could to help their former colleagues".¹²⁸ The result was that the Communist regime in Slovakia achieved something impossible in the Czech Republic. It incorporated into its structure those people who otherwise could and perhaps would create a strong dissident movement in Slovakia. A great number of educated individuals in Slovak who were natural allies of Czech dissidents were, to a lesser or greater degree, incorporated into the Communist regime's structure. They did not remain in their previous, prominent position but could make a living while working in low paid clerical or professional positions. Libraries, Academies and all kinds of redundant research institutes were full of former Communist members who even feared losing those inadequate and badly paid positions. This seemingly better treatment of the expelled Party members made "Normalization" in Slovakia less harsh than in the Czech Republic, but in the long run it was a disaster.¹²⁹ It stilted the professional career of a whole generation of scientists and intellectuals. It also forced them to live with the knowledge that they cooperated with, and some even became

¹²⁷ Selucký ibid.

¹²⁸ Rychlík op.cit., p. 282.

¹²⁹ Pace Jiří Hájek, the Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia in 1968 who justified the lack of "Charter 77" signatories from Slovakia with the following simplified statement that, however, epitomized the stereotypical view among the many Czechs about "normalised" Slovakia: "In Slovakia the 'normalising' repression has been substantially more moderate than in the Czech lands.... Furthermore, political leaders in Bratislava are evidently wiser than their colleagues in Prague. They do not want to destroy their creative intelligentsia. ...In addition, as is known, federalisation of Czechoslovakia has been retained as the only large reform dating back to the Prague Spring. It represented great progress for the Slovaks which has continued under 'Normalization'. The Slovaks do not have national cause to feel that their hopes were frustrated as the Czechs do." Cited in V.V. Kusín: From Dubček... op.cit., p.310.

a part of, a regime that halted reforms in the 1960s and became one of the most reactionary in the Soviet bloc. At the same time, it could not allow any semblance of the reforms, lest they remind the people that it is some kind of return to 1968 reforms. The denial of any reforms was the bedrock on which the Communist regime, during the whole period of "Normalization" 1969-1989, based its political power. This very conservative policy seemed particularly odd at the time in the late 1980s when Michail Gorbachev in the USSR initiated radical reforms through *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* -- both anathemas to the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia.

Thus during two decades of "Normalization", the Communist regime achieved passivity and non-resistance of the vast majority of Slovak society. Resistance in Slovakia was minimal, and only in the second half of the 1980s was there flashes of protest against some of the Communist regime's policies. There were some individuals and groups in Slovakia that came into conflict with the regime but were not political dissidents. The majority of these were fighting or lobbying for certain specific causes. Although these groups and individuals wanted to remain apolitical, the Communist regime viewed criticism of any of its aspects as a challenge to its whole foundation. The regime was terrified of seeing the dissident movement expand in Slovakia. Willing to preserve tight control over the entire society, no aspect could be allowed to function autonomously, no compromise could be made with anyone.

Basically, there were several groupings that came, to various degrees, in conflict with the regime in Slovakia: former reformers from 1968, environmentalists and religious freedom fighters, a tiny group of political dissidents and so-called "positive deviants". Whereas the political dissidents were openly critical of the Communist regime, the others

criticized only some of its policies. The latter groups filled the so-called "gray zone" of being neither supporters nor outright opponents of the regime. This invited a rather loose interpretation of who belonged to this "zone". The spectrum ranged from those who were prosecuted by the regime to those who were members of the Communist Party but were dissatisfied with the condition of their society while the Soviet Union was experiencing *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. One group was the former reformers from the 1960s whose protest, however, was mild and at most asking the Communist regime to revise its position towards the reforms in 1968. More potent and increasingly active was a circle of young environmentalists and artists who, before November 1989, had some contacts with the political dissidents. An interesting phenomenon, specific to Slovakia, was the formation of a group called themselves "positive deviants" who reacted in the late 1980s to stultifying atmosphere in Slovakia surrounded by Communist societies where vibrant dissident movements or political and economic reforms were under way. A separate case represents the religious activists and some of them, although they did not challenge the status quo of the regime, were harshly persecuted and jailed.¹³⁰

Another non-conformist group was the environmentalists and some artists.¹³¹ They organized benign activities and covert gatherings in the early 1980s, but in the late 1980s became more outspoken. Environmentalists published scholarly studies analyzing environmental issues and also inviting sociologists to examine the "social environment", discussing, for example, the dilapidated state of healthcare, culture or urban development.

¹³⁰ See František Mikloško: Prenasledovanie cirkví na Slovensku [Persecution of Religions in Slovakia] (1995, Kalligram, Bratislava).

¹³¹ These were mostly painters based in Bratislava who through activities like private seminars and exhibitions defied the official structures controlled by the regime. Some of them were in

The culmination was the publication of Bratislava – Nahlas in June 1987. The gist of the whole study was strictly apolitical, informing about the sociological and environmental conditions but not suggesting any solutions or criticizing the Communist party.¹³² The reaction by the regime was a hostile refusal to engage in any dialogue with the authors. The regime, to its end in November 1989, continued to act harshly against some of these activists. These, in turn, started to voice some political protests and gradually initiated contacts with Slovak political dissidents.

The most numerous and most suppressed but isolated group that came into conflict with the Communist regime in Slovakia was – predominantly catholic – religious believers. They demanded religious freedom and full autonomy of, primarily, the Catholic Church from the regime's intrusion.¹³³ The Communist regime consistently intimidated the religious freedom fighters, and some of them were imprisoned. Yet, the latter never openly became an anticommunist political movement like, for example, the catholic movement in Poland. They did not demand the resolution of the causes of their predicament (the overall policies of the Communist regime) but insisted on internal

contact with political dissidents and were often interrogated by the police. [From personal communication with two Slovak artists, Daniel Fisher and Rudolf Sikora].

¹³² The document, Bratislava – Nahlas [Bratislava - speaks out], edited by Ján Budaj although a publication of an environmentalist group, it focused more on devastation of the social infrastructure, services, the healthcare system as well as the environment of Bratislava. Most of the contributors were professionals who up to that point had not participated in any sort of critical study.

¹³³ Although the Communist Constitution guaranteed freedom of worship of believers of major religions, the Communist regime insisted on full control of the economic segment of the Church activities, on sanctioning the appointment of priests and Bishops. The regime created a sort of an association of priests called *pacem in teris* that enjoyed benefits denied to other priests. The members of this group of priests publicly praised the Communist regime and the State Security Police as informants used some of them. It is significant that while the Catholic Church in the Czech Republic opened and reflected upon this tarnished chapter of their history, the Catholic

autonomy of the Church. They did not criticize, except the freedom of worship, whatever troubled the society, and thus they mostly remained isolated and unsuccessful in their endeavour. The regime was most hostile for the distribution of religious literature from the West and for publishing samizdat newspapers. A major event organized by this group was the so called "candle demonstration" in Bratislava in February 1988 inviting not only believers but society at large in an effort to interconnect with other dissenting individuals in Slovak society.¹³⁴ The police with water cannon dispersed it and a number of participants were detained. The most important representative of the religious fighters was Jan Čarnogurský, who published the samizdat journal, *Bratislavské listy*, and as a lawyer defended a number of prosecuted individuals including some Czech dissidents. For these activities he was denied the right to practice law and in 1989 – just before the fall of the Communist regime – the same activities caused his detention. Through his activities, as lawyer and publisher of samizdat as the only one from the religious freedom fighters, he came into contact with political dissidents both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.¹³⁵

The outright political dissidents in Slovakia were few in number and furthermore isolated from the mainstream of intellectual circles. There were twelve individuals from Slovakia who signed Charter 77, but only a few of those remain active as dissidents¹³⁶.

Church in Slovakia publicly has not so far discussed the involvement of the members of *pacem in teris* during the Communist era. See František Mikloško: *Prenasledovanie cirkví op.cit.*

¹³⁴ Organisers were Ján Čarnogurský and František Mikloško with the approval of Bishop Ján Chrizoston Korec, who was, after 1989, appointed a Cardinal.

¹³⁵ Ján Čarnogurský: *Videné od Dunaja* [A Danubian view] (1997, Kalligram, Bratislava)

¹³⁶ The two prominent dissidents who also signed Charter 77 were writer Dominik Tatarka and philosopher Miroslav Kusý. The most prolific dissident in Slovakia, although born in the Czech Republic, was philosopher Milan Šimečka, who, however, did not sign the Charter 77. Further

Most of the dissidents were former Communist party members who either left or were expelled from the party after 1968. They clashed openly with the regime and did what the regime detested most -- wrote critically about the nature of the regime and published it in samizdat publications or foreign media. The regime intimidated these individuals and some, like Milan Šimečka, spent several years in prison.¹³⁷ Others, like philosopher Miroslav Kusý or historian Jozef Jablonický, were often harassed and intimidated by the regime. However, altogether, these few Slovak dissidents basically did not represent a "critical mass" of people who could challenge the conservative Communist regime in Slovakia and who could play the same role as their dissident counterparts in the Czech Republic. By and large, they were isolated and unknown to the general public. Their contacts were much closer with their Czech counterparts than intellectuals and professionals in Slovakia.

Thus Slovak society remained rather placid throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By and large, Slovak intellectuals stayed away from those who openly challenged the regime. Late into the Gorbachev reform era, an initial signal of wider resistance in Slovakia finally appeared. In 1988, an initiative emerged from within the Communist party, called "positive deviation". Its aim was to connect mostly social and natural scientists (mostly sociologists) in some kind of loose grouping of those who wanted to do meaningful work within their profession and refuse to follow the regime's proscribed

there were two prominent historians, Jozef Jablonický, a specialist on the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, and Ján Mlynárik, writing about the deportation of Germans after 1945 from Czechoslovakia. Another signatory was a Hungarian in Slovakia, Miklos Duray, who was imprisoned for his criticism of the position of Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. Among the *Charter 77* signatories were also two catholic laymen. See November 1989 a Slovensko: Chronológia a dokumenty, Jozef Žatkuliak ed., (1999, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Bratislava), pp. 41-48.

¹³⁷ For a profile of Milan Šimečka, see journal *Kritika & Kontext* 3-4/99.

activities that were, by and large, nonsensical. Many of them were Communist Party members tried and to reform the Party from within, much in Gorbachev's spirit. The "positive deviants" believed that by doing their work conscientiously and professionally, and that if their number grew from "islands" into "archipelagos" of "positive deviants", then they will challenge the increasingly inflexible regime. Even this minor challenge of the communist regime -- which Czech dissident, and after 1989 prominent politician, Pert Pithart called more a dissent of reflection than action¹³⁸ -- seemed like a watershed in Slovakia. Especially in the context of Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s where the Communist leaders, Gustav Husák and Miloš Jakeš, resisted Gorbachev's reform with utmost determination. However, the "positive deviation" movement was only in its initial phase when the whole Slovak society was caught by surprise in November 1989 as the Communist regime started to crumble.

Slovak society was not only surprised by the sudden demise of the Communist regime – as was any observer of the Communist regimes – but it was also not ready to handle this systemic change. There were no individuals who possessed a degree of legitimacy comparable to the Czech dissidents and who would be considered as natural leaders. Those few Slovak dissidents, generally unknown, were not obvious successors to the Communist leadership. This was especially so in a society where membership of the Communist party was not as dogmatically perceived as in the Czech Republic; where a number of prominent Slovak Communists were perceived as relatively progressive,

¹³⁸ In Soňa Szomolányi: "Prehistoria, zrod a rola aktéra novembra '89 – VPN" [Prehistory, emergence and the role of the actor of November 1989 – PAV] In I. Antalová ed.: Verejnost proti násiliu: 1989-1991 [Public against violence] (1998, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Bratislava) p. 19. Szomolányi herself was among the main initiator "positive deviants" movement before November 1989.

dwelling somewhere in the “gray zone” of “positive deviance”. Thus this unusual condition brought, after November 1989, leaders into the forefront in Slovakia that were without legitimacy from the past and often unknown. Of great consequence for the whole development in post-communist Slovakia was that, from the outset, membership of the Communist party was not an obstacle to obtaining a prominent political post. What was an obstacle, at least right after November 1989, was cooperation or any association with the Communist State Security Police (ŠtB). Before we deal with this crucial aspect of Slovakia’s development after 1989, let us deal with the collapse of the Communist regime in Slovakia.

5. The Fall of the Communist Regime

It has been debated in academic circles in Slovakia whether or not the so-called “Velvet revolution” (a journalistic invention) in Czechoslovakia was in fact a “revolution” at all. It is a matter of defining the word “revolution” that has caused the confusion. For a number of interpreters, the word “revolution” is associated with preparation and often a certain degree of violence. There was neither planning nor large scale violence – which was only minimal -- involved in the “Velvet revolution”, and thus analysts prefer to call it a “collapse” or “fall” of the Communist regime. However, these latter terms do not provide the whole picture because the words “collapse” or “fall” mean the termination of something, but contain no notion that something new emerged that took over the old regime. To the contrary, if we understand under the term “revolution” a systemic change from one system to another, then November 1989 in Czechoslovakia

was a revolution. The change of political power was peaceful and extremely popular among the population. And as spectacular was the default of the seemingly invincible Communist regime, equally impressive was the emergence of two civic movements, both in Prague and Bratislava, that took over political power in the country. Whereas in Prague the dissidents were dominant as the new power holders, in Bratislava a few former dissidents were active but, by and large, played only a marginal role.

The fall of the Communist regime was greeted in Slovakia with the same enthusiasm as in the Czech Republic. The bondage of Communism had ended, bringing relief but also confusion. After two decades of suffocating under Communist "Normalization", the main squares in every major Slovak towns were full of chanting and happy citizens promising and asking for reconciliation and clemency for all except the top ranking Communists. This euphoria was due to the unexpected collapse of the Communist government, the opening up of borders that had been sealed for four decades, and the great hopes the population had about the democratic future. What was unique about Slovakia within Czechoslovakia was the speed in which the antidemocratic populist and nationalistic forces emerged and gained popularity. Let us review the events and political developments after November 1989 and then focus on the consequences of the Communist political culture on developments during the 1989-1992 period.

Unrest in Slovakia started only a few days after it had started in the Czech Republic, and resulted in the creation of a political movement -- Public Against Violence (PAV) -- analogous to the Civic Forum in Prague.¹³⁹ A few people in Bratislava who

¹³⁹ For a discussion among the founder of PAV about the days that proceeded and immediately followed the creation of PAV see Ingrid Antalová ed.: Verejnosc' proti násiliu: 1989-1991 [Public Against Violence] (1998, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Bratislava) pp. 22-77.

had been informed about the Prague students demonstration, called most of their friends and asked them to spread the news and to come on November 19 to “Umelecká Beseda”, a building belonging to the Slovak Painters Union. Around five hundred individuals met there, and from this group a nucleus emerged that founded the PAV movement.¹⁴⁰ They organized rallies at the main square in Bratislava, and outlined the first proclamations of the new democratic regime.¹⁴¹ Mostly artists and intellectuals, the PAV core leadership of about a dozen individuals became highly popular, and within a few days it found itself in the position of power holders in Slovakia. The top Communist leaders in Slovakia were afraid even to negotiate the take-over of power with the PAV leaders, as was the case in the Czech Republic. They simply deserted their posts.¹⁴² Thus instead of negotiating with the Communist leaders, like the Civic Forum in Prague, the PAV leaders just stepped into the position of power. One consequence of such power change without negotiations with the Communist leadership was that it was not clear how and who, except the top leadership, should stay or be removed from the positions in government apparatus.

In addition, The key PAV leaders were reluctant to take the top executive and legislative positions in the country. Although they were basically uncontested in their position during the first few months after the fall of Communism, they expressed little

¹⁴⁰ A rather odd name (*Verejnost' proti násiliu* in Slovak) of the movement was derived from a statement issued on November 19 after the news – later revealed to be fabricated by the State Security Police – that a student was killed during the demonstration in Prague.

¹⁴¹ See documents 62, 66, 68, 75, 87, 88, 102, 103, 110, 123, 133, 137, 146, 154, 159 in *November 1989 a Slovensko: Chronológia a dokumenty*, Jozef Žatkuliak ed., *ibid.* (1999)

¹⁴² See the debate of this issue among the PAV leaders in I. Antalová ed. *Op.cit.* pp. 88-91.

will to become the political leaders, except to remain temporary executors of political power until "real politicians take over". They controlled the political scene from their position of popular leader, and their primary aim was to lead Slovakia to free elections in June 1990.¹⁴³ There were two reasons the PAV leaders were reluctant and undecided to stay in power after 1989. First, they were mostly intellectuals, artists and professionals and thus they saw the collapse of the Communist system as an opportunity finally to embark on doing what they had dreamt of and were unable to do during the Communist era. Second, they had neither political experience nor had they, individually (in writing) or collectively, contemplated before 1989 what would happen after the collapse of the Communist regime. They felt alienated, isolated and marginalized from the public sphere of their society. This was in sharp contrast to the Czech dissidents who had debated since the middle 1980s what could happen and what should be done in the case of the collapse of the Communist regime.¹⁴⁴

The dual handicap of politicians who were supposed to lead a society that was just undergoing revolutionary transformation had further aggravating effects. The PAV leaders admired the Czech leaders, especially Václav Havel, and, among other things, encouraged the same plan and pace of economic transformation as in the Czech Republic. If such a transformation was appropriate for the Czech Republic, Slovakia was utterly unsuitable for such neo-liberal transformation. To be fair to the PAV leaders their

¹⁴³ In fact, initially they even refused to register the PAV to run in those first free elections.

¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, a frequent participant and perhaps an initiator of these debates was Milan Šimečka who lived in Slovakia but knew that such debate in Slovakia was impossible. [Personal communication]

position and task was, in a way, Herculean and of Sisyphus at the same time. It seems that Slovak society, after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, would pour wrath on any political leaders. One can understand that the PAV leaders did not realize that it was necessary try to slow down as much as possible the economic and social collapse and to negotiate with the Czech economic leaders a special treatment for Slovakia. They were simply quite ignorant that something of that order was necessary for they own and society's sake. They knew little what were the true conditions in Slovakia outside of Bratislava from where the majority came from. As opposite to the Czech dissidents who were mapping the ills of their society and thus were relatively ready for the regime's collapse, the PAV leaders knew little to what grave extent the Communist regime had made docile and altered the political culture of Slovak society.

The first political leaders after November 1989 in Slovakia perhaps should have known all the pitfalls awaiting a society during the post-communist transformation. However, to blame them in retrospect for what they did wrongly would be simply a proclamation of moral judgment rather than an analysis of the condition of Slovak society on the eve of the democratic era. Still, this does not prevent us from exposing the weakness of those first leaders who, thanks to their incompetent policies, were not only removed from power but were instrumental in opening doors to politicians who later plunged Slovakia into a status of illiberal democracy. John Gray was quite accurate in this respect when he wrote in the early 1990s:¹⁴⁵

In the post-communist world, weak democratic regimes which sponsor projects of market reform resulting in economic dislocation which in turn violates popular standards

¹⁴⁵ John Gray: "The Post-Communist Societies in Transition" In his Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age (1995, Routledge, London) p. 56.

of acceptability will be swept away, and replaced by regimes whose commitment are neither to market nor to democracy.

To realize this omen was beyond the capacity of the PAV leaders especially during the period right after November 1989 when hopes of freedom and prosperity were expected to arrive automatically and without much hardship. In addition, they did not really wish to remain in their position for long. In fact, the sudden limelight and power was discomfiting for them. They intuitively must have felt that their sudden rise to power was somehow undeserved and accidental. In fact, their feeling of being in their position without legitimacy was not entirely incorrect. They lacked the recognition by the Slovak population that their Czech dissident colleagues had, who were respected for their activities in the dissent. The PAV leaders were active just prior to November 1989 but so were many others, even Communist Party members in Slovakia who admired Gorbachev. Slovak society rejected them and eventually replaced them with political leaders who were more like an average citizen – silent during the “Normalization” period, feeling victimized and defensive. Hence, the PAV leaders were seen by the growing number of their opponents as illegitimate imposters.

So by March 1990 the PAV movement’s popularity had dropped dramatically, and there was a danger that they would not be elected to parliament. They quickly invited popular figures, including former Communists (including Dubček) to win the first free elections in June 1990 (Appendix1). Thus the PAV accepted those former Communists, even high-ranking officials, who were willing to work to rebuild society. They filled the vacant posts, often approving those who had been in the apparatus before November 1989. To be sure, this stilted rotation or “revolution” of power was also out of necessity

because there simply was not a big enough group of non-Communists to run the country. Hence, a great number of middle ranked Communist apparatchiks continued in their position by simply dropping their Communist party membership and becoming members of the PAV. A prominent group that also stepped in and was welcomed was the Communist reformers from 1968, led by Alexander Dubček, who had been expelled or marginalized during the period of "Normalization".¹⁴⁶

The combination of both a relatively small number of PAV core leaders and the little contact they had with potential candidates for political posts, created the result that they gradually sanctioned the political positions of a wide spectrum of individuals whose ambitions and intentions varied significantly. The result was substantial continuation of the "old" regime apparatus in Slovakia, unparalleled in the Czech Republic. While low-ranking officials were kept in office in both republics, the top Communist leaders were dealt with differently. From the Czech Republic not a single high-ranking Communist was admitted to the federal or Czech Republic government after 1989. Politicians were selected according to their political and social status during the "Normalization" period and the majority of them knew each other or were known figures during the Communist era. In Slovakia, a number of prominent Communists were allowed into politics. For example, important positions right after November 1989 were granted to prominent Slovak Communist leaders like Rudolf Schuster, Milan Čič and Marian Čalfa.¹⁴⁷ These

¹⁴⁶ The most prominent among those reformed Communist was, of course, Alexander Dubček who joined the PAV in March 1990.

¹⁴⁷ Rudolf Schuster, one of a few popular Communist leaders before 1989, was elected Chairman of the Slovak Parliament in December 1989 with the approval of the PAV leadership. (In 1999 Schuster was elected President of Slovakia.) Milan Čič, the last Slovak Minister of Justice before November 1989, became the Prime Minister of Slovakia. (Čič became the

prominent Communist officials saw no reason why they should step down, especially after they considered themselves, and were viewed, as moderate Communist leaders. They had been in the Party, but they presented themselves as akin to being victims of most executive orders and under duress from their superiors, who in turn had been following orders from Moscow. Significantly, the prominent Slovak Communists in the post-communist government were accepted both by Slovak society and, paradoxically, by the Czech political leaders, including Václav Havel.

The different criteria used in the Czech Republic and Slovakia to assess the former Communists and for that matter the whole Communist era, have their origins in the different experience of these two societies during the "Normalization" period as already described. The result of these different developments in both societies conditioned the turbulent political events during the 1989-1992 period within Czechoslovakia.

Hence, a unique condition within Slovak society after November 1989, the lack of sustainable legitimacy of the PAV leaders and their own unwillingness to take over the position of power or readjust the pace economic transformation according to specific condition in Slovakia made the political condition quite unstable. The unpreparedness of the whole society to digest the fast changes of post-communist transformation, combined with rapid economic and social dislocation, made Slovak society prone to great disillusionment and hence was more susceptible to demagoguery and populism than the Czech society. This was especially so after such a fast economic transformation which

Chairman of the Slovak Supreme Court during 1993-1999.) Marian Čalfa, a Communist Federal Minister, became the Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia as a result of the negotiations between the Civic Forum and with the Communist leadership in Prague. They were allowed to remain in

had had a much greater negative impact on Slovak than on Czech society. Not surprisingly, more Slovaks than just militant nationalists felt uneasy in a society where social mobility and status were being decided according to a rigid system reflecting the condition in, and appropriate for, Czech society only.

To sum up, the new leaders who were catapulted to their position were reluctant to be fully in charge or maintain power for a long period of time. They were unprepared for their new role, not unlike their co-citizens in Slovakia. All available evidence, including the personal contact of this writer with the main protagonists of the PAV movement, indicates that their intention and efforts were sincere and courageous. They lacked what they must have lacked as the product of a society that was tested to its limits by the fate of its modern age: knowledge of their society, available material wealth to assure economic success, and legitimacy. The PAV leaders, as was argued, because they did not prepare themselves or society for the day when the Communist era was to end, had little to offer in order to sustain the economic and social conditions the population had been used to before November 1989. More sadly still, they were not aware of their doomed position and for many years since then they repeatedly revisited those few months in power, and tried to pin point where they had made a mistake. Political theorist, John Gray, offered an explanation for the futility of these politicians, although his assessment was a general observation: "One of the lessons of historical experience is that a painful and protracted period of adjustment can be endured during the transition process provided the government overseeing it possesses popular legitimacy". And continues that the "post-communist government – in this respect no different from their

their position until the free elections in June 1990. Čalfa survived in his position until June 1992 with encouragement from the President, Václav Havel.

Western counterparts – need to deliver a reasonable degree of economic security to the general population if they are to survive”.¹⁴⁸ This is a lesson to comprehend the early post-communist period in Slovakia, but also a lesson for that society even after illiberal democracy has been repelled in 1998. Before that, let us analyze how and when the “turmidor” entered the scene in post-communist Slovakia.

6. The legacy of Secret Police Files

The period 1989-1992 of post-communist transition in Slovakia can be understood through its different aspects, and the growing literature about this important period of Slovak history testifies to the multiple angle of interpretations.¹⁴⁹ Various authors stress either a long- or short-term impact on the unfolding during this period. The impact of the history, political culture and legacy of the Communist regime coexists or competes with contingent factors of political and economic transition. Often this period is viewed through a prism of the subsequent break-up of Czechoslovakia and Slovakia's turn to a semi-authoritarian regime after 1993. There is one factor that, from the perspective of current analysis that follows the rise and fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia, plays the pre-eminent role. It is the effect of the State Security Police (ŠtB) files from the Communist era. It combines the long-term legacy of the Communist regime, and the short-term impact due to the subsequent fate of these files after 1989. The handling of the Secret Police files was the most unfortunate and, so it seems in

¹⁴⁸ Gray op.cit., pp. 58-59.

Western literature – in fact, among Slovak analysts as well – the least appreciated development that affected the unfolding of post-communist transformation in Czechoslovakia. It will be argued that it significantly contributed to the break-up of Czechoslovakia (Chapter IV) and the subsequent radicalization of politics in Slovakia (Chapter V).

The Communist Secret Police files comprise one of the most pernicious chapters in the post-communist period.¹⁵⁰ The files contained information on the activities of its agents, what they reported, what tasks were executed and whom the agents contacted or recruited. Their role, at least from the 1969 on, was more to spread the fear of massive infiltration of the whole society rather than to directly punish or execute individuals. The exceptions were the dissidents and anyone who openly challenged the Communist regime. Hence the files could not have been ignored after 1989 because those on their lists were open to blackmail by those who possessed or somehow got hold of them. On the other hand, how could a new democratic government punish someone on the basis of evidence gathered by a Communist intelligence organization? Paradoxically then, the post-communist regime relied on the evidence left by the regime it had tried to eliminate. These files were extremely explosive if in the wrong hands.

One way to analyze post-Communist Slovakia is to account for the struggle among various groups in their handling of the Communist State Security Police files. The handling of the ŠtB files was the most damaging and tormenting aspect of the

¹⁴⁹ See chapter I., section 3.

¹⁵⁰ For the case of secret police operations in East Germany, see J. Gauck: Die Stasi-Akten (1991, Rohwolt taschenbuch, Hamburg) and the personal account of Timothy Garton Ash: The File: A Personal History (1998, Random House, New York).

"velvet revolution", and in many ways shaped the political evolution in Slovakia. It was not the content of these files that was so damaging, but the handling of these files by the politicians after 1989. Let us look into the origin and the purpose of this dangerous legacy left by the Communist era.

The Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, like in other Communist countries, created a network of state ŠtB informers in order to be informed about any independent activity in society, and also to intimidate the regime's real or potential opponents. There were several categories of agents, informers and confidants that were co-responsible for the regime's most perfidious excesses. They were part and parcel of an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that defined the crumbling totalitarian regimes. Some cooperated with the ŠtB willingly in order to benefit from the rewards that the regime allocated for these services; others became informers against their will as a result of intimidation and the insidious tactics of the Secret Police. What is certain is that, especially after 1969, no one could serve in the ŠtB out of conviction or out of fanatical faith in the ideological dogma. If membership of the Communist Party was perceived as partly cynical, partly pragmatic and was somehow morally forgivable and was not automatically a reason for dismissal -- a number of the PAV nucleus were former Communists -- being an agent of the Communist ŠtB was a different issue. These were considered the most insidious individuals who had been executors of the worse policies of the decaying Communist regime. The ŠtB apparatus was a power unit of its own; misusing its position, keeping thousands of people under surveillance and millions of people under psychological pressure. Thus to be an agent of the ŠtB was something abhorrent, something beyond exoneration. Simply association with the ŠtB, regardless of the motives behind their

membership or the nature of their activities tainted them. To find oneself on the list meant, not only a deep feeling of shame, but also fear that the new regime might punish these members of the ŠtB and use them as scapegoats for all the excesses of the Communist regime.¹⁵¹

The creation of this extensive network of informers was not only the safeguard of the Communist regime, but also a source of disloyalty for any regime that emerged after November 1989. The last demonic laughter of the Communist regime in the form of the list of ŠtB agents, made all former agents a most vulnerable group that was ready to do anything in order to change, or at least undermine, the *status quo*. Indeed, these informers seemed especially dangerous after the demise of the Communist regime because they wished to do everything to influence, infiltrate or compromise those that, after November 1989, took over power.

Yet, although, there were a great number of those most despicable agents that deserved harsh punishment, there must also have been a great number of more ambiguous cases. The State Security Police, during the Communist era, tried to get as many as possible agents on its list, and often it received a signature from individuals who subsequently never cooperated with it. In Czechoslovakia, most of those who were traveling to the West for whatever reason were automatically asked to sign a cooperation "form" with the ŠtB. Some were registered as agents without ever being aware of it. In Slovakia, this stigma of ŠtB membership was particularly odd considering that no prominent Communist Party members were on the list because they had power and the ŠtB was at their disposal. None of these were punished, in fact there was never even the

¹⁵¹ There is almost no literature on the ŠtB activities in Slovakia. And my observations are

intention of putting on trial prominent Communist apparatchiks who remained in power or even advanced in their position after 1989. The ŠtB informers, although unwilling to admit to being such, felt morally vindicated with those prominent former Communists remaining in politics.

In the hectic period after November 1989, the new leaders were ambivalent about their intention and it was never clear whether the initial, relatively lenient, treatment of the ŠtB agents would be the last word.¹⁵² Among the first things done by the Federal government was to expel known ŠtB agents from government and state agencies. After much deliberation, Federal Parliament passed the controversial Screening Law¹⁵³, which stipulated that there was to be no prison sentence or fine for being an agent. The only penalty was that the agent was barred from state services, including politics, for five years. A fair retribution if universally imposed soon after November 1989. Rather, after several delays of passing the bill, it was used selectively and eventually perceived as a

based on communication with former Minister of Interior, Ján Langoš and a former ŠtB agent, whose name he did not wish to be revealed.

¹⁵² Throughout the 1990-1992 period, the topic of ŠtB agents was a permanently debated topic in the media and was a source of tension among politicians. It was blown out of proportion after the publishing of the list in a controversial periodical *Rudá Krávo* by former dissident Petr Cibulka. The Ministry of Interior refused to publish an official version, but Cibulka's list was based on a reliable source. However, it contained numerous mistakes that caused much anguish and frustration among many innocent individuals. Consequently it was a source of much political confusion and ill-will. A more reliable version of the list was published by Cibulka in 1998. See Cibulkovy seznamy spolupracovníků ŠtB [Cibulka's list of cooperators with the State Security Police] (1992, Ruda Kravo, Prague). See the list on www.cibulka.cz

¹⁵³ "Lustračný zákon" in Slovak – literary "Lustration law", as it is sometimes translated in the Western literature.

tool for political intimidation. The list was kept secret and thus anyone could be accused by a political opponent of being an ŠtB informer.¹⁵⁴

The handling of the State Security Police files was most damaging for Slovakia where, from the beginning, it was used as a tool of political denunciation. The first notable casualty was Ján Budaj, an environmental activist from the 1980s and, after November 1989, one of the leaders of the PAV movement. Only one day following the first free elections in June 1990, won by the PAV movement, news of him having been an agent caused a shock among his many admirers. People like Budaj, who were informers but felt more like hostages of the Communist regime, refused to admit their guilt, especially when a number of former prominent Slovak Communists stayed in politics after 1989. His fall from grace was particularly damaging to the PAV movement because they revealed him as having been an ŠtB agent only immediately after the 1990 elections, although it became clear that his colleagues knew about it prior to the elections. The PAV never recovered from this setback and its next two years of existence was entangled in a debate over Budaj's resignation, the Screening Law and the handling of the State Security Police informers. The greatest beneficiary from this confusion, and one who soon realized the potential power of misusing the list for political ends, was Vladimír Mečiar.

There is strong evidence that Mečiar was himself an ŠtB agent before 1989, and as the Minister of Interior he controlled the files of ŠtB agents.¹⁵⁵ Both as a Minister of

¹⁵⁴ President Václav Havel protested against passing the law considering the unreliability of the Secret Police list. In fact, he was listed on the list in a category of a "candidate" that was subsequently dropped from the law because those on the list might not know about being registered by the Secret Police and thus were not willingly co-operating with the regime.

Interior and then, from June 1990, as the Prime Minister, he arbitrarily used these files even against those who might not have been agents, but had a file as someone who interested the ŠtB. Even as the Prime Minister, he "kept finding" on his desk the files of various individuals he was trying to depose. Mečiar's first dismissal from power in March 1991 was, among other things, due to strong evidence that he destroyed his own ŠtB files and removed boxes of files from the Ministry. Never admitting to having been an ŠtB informer, Mečiar labeled the accusation against him as a witch-hunt and an excuse to dismiss him. His defense consisted of turning to the public and appealing to them directly - this subsequently became his trademark.

Mečiar's transformation from a defender of the Czechoslovak Federation, then autonomy and eventually of the independence of Slovakia, was in concordance with his attempt to repeal the Screening Law. Only an independent Slovakia of Mečiar's making could accept leaders whose past was not decisive. This won him a great number of unexpected supporters, including Ján Budaj. The focus of the next chapter, dealing with the break-up of Czechoslovakia, will also trace how Mečiar's evolution from being a federalist to a separatist was on account of his being tainted by the accusation of having cooperated with the ŠtB.

¹⁵⁵ See report by Parliamentary committee led by František Javorský in *Slovenský Východ*, March 23, 1992. See also Samuel Abrahám: "Early Election in Slovakia" In *Government & Opposition* 30:1 (Winter 1995) p. 83.

Review

In this chapter, what was most evident was how historical and contingent factors interacted and influenced the early years of post-communist transition in Slovakia. Conditions during the Normalization period 1969-1989, the political developments after November 1989, the handling of Secret Police files and the rise of Vladimír Mečiar to power, are all indirectly interconnected. I write "indirectly" because there is no direct causality among them, at most a probability principle applies. More importantly, by examining one factor one can explain the influence and connection with others. Focusing on them in isolation, we cannot exactly measure the contribution of either of them on the shape of post-communist development in Slovakia or elsewhere. This chapter showed how the lack of legitimacy and inability to handle the grave economic and social condition of the first political leaders in Slovakia manifested in a setback to reform and democracy. Also, how policies that were difficult to navigate soon after November 1989 opened the doors to populist and nationalist leaders who dragged Slovakia into a political regime that we can call illiberal.

Chapter IV

The Break-up of Czechoslovakia

Overview

In this chapter the main argument put forth is that the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the breakdown of the democratization process in Slovakia are closely related. Conversely, the reason for the division of Czechoslovakia can be explained in large part by tracing the reasons for undemocratic conduct in Slovakia. It will be argued that the Slovak leaders' drive to independence was motivated neither by a surge of nationalism nor by a widespread animosity towards the "domineering" Czechs. Rather, it was the political expression of the unique experience undergone by Slovaks during the period of Normalization 1969-1989 and its impact on the transformation process after 1989 as accounted for in the previous chapter. The role of Vladimír Mečiar in the process of the break-up was preeminent and will be examined, but the focus in this chapter will be more on his opponents who failed to stop both Mečiar's authoritarian policies and the break-up of Czechoslovakia itself.

Introduction

The break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1992, the so-called "velvet divorce", drew far less attention in the world media than the "velvet revolution" of November, 1989 and its symbol, Václav Havel. The break-up was overshadowed, for the most part, by events in two other disintegrating Communist federations -- the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. At least, many early commentators remarked, the disintegration proceeded peacefully and was resolved at a negotiation table rather than in the trenches. However, a broader and

more thorough analysis of the political and social conditions in Slovakia that played a critical role in the break-up has been emerging only slowly.¹⁵⁶

Although, a majority of Slovaks wished to change the status of Slovakia within the federation but they did not desire to divide the country. Nevertheless, the break-up was accepted with resignation; and the political opponents of Mečiar who championed a common state, neither garnered much support in the elections nor did they manage to rally the population against the split.¹⁵⁷ It seems that a vital factor was missing -- something to fight for that would hold the two nations together. Slovaks had chosen a populist leader instead of the moderate, pro-Federal line of politicians represented by Havel, Alexander Dubček and the Slovak liberals.

The following chapter is neither an analysis nor a survey of growing literature on the break-up, although reference to some of them will be indicated. I will mainly refer to primary sources and literature published by or about the main political actors during the studied period.¹⁵⁸ The aim of this chapter is to indicate the complex causes of the break-

¹⁵⁶ A typical example of initial Western scholars' treatment of the break-up of Czechoslovakia is "Special Section on the Former Czechoslovakia" in *Telos* #94 (Winter 1992-93). In ninety pages there is hardly any analysis of the condition and dynamics in Slovakia. Another monograph by a Canadian social scientist, Robert A. Young: *The Breakup of Czechoslovakia* (1994, Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, Kingston, Ontario, Canada) is a rather descriptive and often inaccurate study relying on limited secondary sources. Its aim is to find parallels with, and lessons for, the possible break-up of Canada. The most extensive work on the break-up, Jiri Musil's ed.: *The End of Czechoslovakia* (1995, Central European Press, Budapest) contains a number articles covering several aspects of Czech and Slovak coexistence. The overall tone is the inevitability of the division due to historical causes and the events during the transformation.

¹⁵⁷ see Jan Obrman's "The Czechoslovak Elections" in *Radio Free Europe/RL* 1:26 (26 June 1992), pp.12-19.

¹⁵⁸ Especially relevant is Petr Pithart series of articles "Konec Československa" [The end of Czechoslovakia] collected in his *Po devětaosmdesátém: Kto jsme?* [After the 1989: Who are we?] (1998, Kalligram, Bratislava, Doplnek, Brno); Also articles by Martin Bútora, Zora Bútorová, Fedor Gál and Petr Pithart In Rudiger Kipke and Karel Vodička eds.: *Rozloučení s*

up, and to attempt to position it in the wider context of related factors present in the continuum of the 1989-1998 period in Slovakia.

As the years pass by from the break-up of Czechoslovakia, one is more and more tempted to believe that it was inevitable after all. Subsequent developments moved these two societies so far away that within a year after the break-up, politically, economically and with respect to the overall will to build civil society, the two countries could not stand further away from each other.¹⁵⁹ However, the inevitability of the break-up seems to be too simplistic an explanation. The multiplicity of causes leaves analysts grasping for an explanation. The key is to find out, to delineate which component and factors from the impressive collection involved played the crucial role in the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Thus we are left with a difficult question: why did the transformation from Communism to democracy result in the break-up of the country? In addition, as was argued in Chapter I., it is difficult to assess the relative contribution and mutual interrelationship of the long-term historical setting and short-term political unfolding during the 1989-1992 period. Was the break-up historically determined by differences in Czech and Slovak political cultures? Or, was it instead triggered by political events after November 1989? Was it due to the historical animosity between Czechs and Slovaks, suppressed for decades by the Communist regime, which resulted in a drive towards

Československem [A Farewell to Czechoslovakia], (1993, Český Spisovatel, Prague); see also S. Abrahám: "The Break-up of Czechoslovakia: A Threat to Democratization in Slovakia?" in Soňa Szomolányi and Grigorij Mesežnikov: The Slovak Path - to Democracy? (1994, Slovak Political Science Association, Bratislava).

¹⁵⁹ Toward the late 1990s, however, the condition and mood in the two countries changed, became more similar and different. And it was not only because conditions in Slovakia after 1998 improved, but also because conditions in the Czech Republic deteriorated politically, and economically the latter was not as vibrant as in the early 1990s.

“emancipation” by the Slovaks? Or was the break-up the product of an inexperienced political leadership that lacked the competence to resolve the constitutional and structural impasse of the 1989-1992 period?

A closer analysis indicates a much deeper crisis than the overtly peaceful division of the country might have suggested. The following analysis will argue first that the long-term Slovak-Czech relationship, although problematic, was not the cause of the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Secondly, that Communism had a quite different impact on Slovak and Czech political cultures, and therefore the two peoples entered the post-Communist era on a very different footing. Thirdly, the transformation between 1989 and 1992 will be presented as a period during which the main political actors precipitated the division of Czechoslovakia.

Let us briefly outline the literature on the subject of the break-up. It loosely falls into four categories. The first group focuses both on the different political culture in the Czech and Slovak lands, and on the historical incompatibility of the two societies that, during its seventy-five-year long existence, underwent numerous crises. According to this group, the Communist regime only temporarily suppressed Slovak ambitions.¹⁶⁰ They view the break-up as a natural outcome in the historical process of Slovak emancipation. The second group, although paying lip service to historical disparities, sees the cause of the break-up as a constitutional impasse inherited from the ill-designed Communist federal structure that allowed Slovak nationalists and populists on both side

¹⁶⁰ C. Skalnik Leff: "National Identity and the Disintegration of Czechoslovakia" in her The Czech and Slovak Republic: Nation Versus State (1997, Westview Press) pp. 126-145; Sharon L. Wolchik: "The Politics of Ethnicity in Post-Communist Czechoslovakia" in *EEPS*, 8:1 (Winter 1994), pp. 153-188.

to dismantle the federation.¹⁶¹ The third group of commentators ascribes the break-up of Czechoslovakia to Vladimír Mečiar's cunning tactics and populist promises made before the June 1992 general elections.¹⁶² Although his role was important, his actions alone cannot explain his electoral success and the end of the federation. Finally, the fourth group does not attempt to answer why, but rather 'what' happened, and provides a thorough, very useful account of the political evolution during the 1989-1992 period that led to the break-up.¹⁶³ All four groups pay close attention to opinion polls provided by a number of Slovak sociologists who took detailed surveys prior to and after the break-up.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Katarina Mathernova: "Czecho-Slovakia: Constitutional Disappointments" in A.E. Dick Howard ed.: Constitution Making in Eastern Europe (1993); Sabrina Petra Remet: "The Reemergence of Slovakia" *Nationalities Papers* 22:1 (1994), pp. 99-117; Abby Innes: "The Break-up of Czechoslovakia: The Impact of Party Development on the Separation of the State" in *EEPS* 11:3 (Fall 1997), pp. 393-435.

¹⁶² Ota Ulč: "Czechoslovakia's Velvet Divorce" in *East European Quarterly*, 30:3 (September 1996), pp. 331-352.

¹⁶³ Gordon Wightman: "The Development of the Party System and the Break-up of Czechoslovakia" in Gordon Wightman ed.: Party Formation in East Central Europe (1995, Edward Elgar Publishing, Aldershot) pp. 59-78; Abby Innes, *op.cit.*, falls also in this category of a detailed description of events in the 1989-1993 period; A survey of various views of the break-up concluding, basically, that all factors were relevant, is provided by Jon Elster: "Consenting Adults or the Sorcerer's Apprentice?" in *East European Constitutional Review* 4:1 (Winter 1995) pp. 36-41.

¹⁶⁴ See very useful studies by Slovak sociologists: Martin Bútora, Zora Bútorová and Olga Gyarfašová: "From Velvet Revolution to Velvet Divorce? (Reflection on Slovakia's Independence)" in Janos M. Kovacs ed.: Transformation to Capitalism? The Communist Legacy in Eastern Europe (1994); Zora Bútorová and Martin Bútora: "Political Parties, Value Orientations and Slovakia's Road to Independence" in Gordon Wightman ed.: Party Formation in East Central Europe (1995, Edward Elgar Publishing, Aldershot) pp. 107-133.

1. Context or Process?

Before we examine the events and factors leading towards the break-up, let us outline the theoretical and methodological difficulties involved in the explanation and justification of various causes of such an event. This would help us to understand the relationship between the long and short-term factors relevant during the transformation. More specifically, how can one account for the effect of short-term, accidental or contingent political decisions made during the transformation while still recognizing the importance of the long-term historical, economic and social setting? The long-term, societal context includes the level of economic development, the degree of national integration, and the character of the national political culture; the short-term political process, in contrast, focuses mainly on the choices and strategies adopted by key actors during the transformation period.¹⁶⁵ In post-Communist East Central Europe, contingency seems to be the critical factor during a state's search for its national, political and economic identity.¹⁶⁶ Yet, it would be a mistake to underestimate the long-term unresolved problems. The question is, rather, how significant was the impact of these problems on the break-up?

In the following analysis, the elements of both context and process will be used to explain the impact of the historical setting on political developments during the

¹⁶⁵ Russell Bova "Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transformation", *World Politics* 44 (Oct. 1991) p.126; see also Chapter I. (Section 3).

¹⁶⁶ Claus Offe claims that the main problem of the former Communist countries is that everything becomes contingent, lacking any non-contingent "givens" which would be suitable, fixed parameters of the politics of reform. "Capitalism by Democratic Design? Democratic Theory Facing the Triple Transformation in East Central Europe", *Social Research* 58:4 (Winter 1991), p.882.

transformation. The former to account for the state of political culture in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the latter to focus on the political choices and contingencies which were decisive after November 1989 and led to the break-up. However, such a broad theoretical framework tells us neither how far back we should focus on the historical setting, nor which events became the turning points that caused the actual break-up. Any selection of variables appears controversial, considering the conflicting views about the reasons for the break-up among Slovaks and Czechs themselves. Why? It has to do with their interpretation of the cause of the break-up itself: if the long-term setting was the main factor, then the break-up can be presented as inevitable. However, if the short-term process was crucial, then the break-up was contingent, accidental and thus forced by the politicians. The Slovak nationalists and, *ex post*, the Mečiar leadership, presented the break-up as inevitable, regardless of efforts to find reconciliation during 1989-1992. "A thousand years Slovaks have waited for this opportunity", Mečiar had himself heard during the independence ceremony¹⁶⁷. They presented their task during the 1989-1992 period leading to the break-up as painful but necessary surgery, and insisted on taking credit for its peaceful execution. To the contrary, those who were for the preservation of Czechoslovakia claimed that it was Mečiar's shrewd tactics, condoned and even encouraged by the Czech leader, Václav Klaus, that brought about the final break-up.

The question then is how to see the break-up as not inevitable, but still yet having its roots in both the historical setting and the post-1989 developments? How far back should the analysis go, and what events or periods in Czech and Slovak history were

¹⁶⁷ Daily *Narodná Obroda*, January 3, 1993.

decisive for the break-up? The present analysis will focus on the period of "Normalization", 1969-1989. This requires an explanation of why previous historical periods play a less important role in understanding the break-up. We need to explain why, even if the old unresolved problems between Czechs and Slovaks were to cause trouble after the fall of the Communist regime, they were not decisive in causing the split in 1992. I shall argue here that it was not so much the old conflicts themselves as the distortion of the Czechs' and Slovaks' historical memory by the Communist regime, in combination with post-Communist contingencies that precipitated the break-up. The first Czechoslovak President, T.G.Masaryk, asserted in the 1930s that the two nations would need fifty years to resolve their mutual predicaments. However, he meant fifty years of negotiation in a calm, democratic atmosphere, not three years of hectic post-communist transformation in an unstable political, social and economic setting marred by distorted historical memory. It is to the latter factor that we turn now.

2. Lack of Historical Memory and Post-Communist Transformation

As was argued in Chapter I., recounting history by historians and the perception of that history by the population are two distinct, though related things. If objective literature is unavailable or is tainted by ideological interpretation, then the perception of history is that much more subjective and superficial. Strong distortion and constant reinterpretation of historical events characterized the Communist historiography. Hence even educated individuals, even if they wished, could not obtain reliable information about the nation's past. The result has been not only a distortion of the historical past, but also an inability to draw on historical experience, so necessary especially for a society

that is in crisis. One of the major legacies of the Communist era in Czechoslovakia was not only distortion of historical memory, but mainly the inability and incapacity of the political elite after 1989 to draw on historical experience regarding Slovak and Czech coexistence.

If the politicians, journalists and other prominent actors after 1989 knew the debate on autonomy and the "Slovak Question" in the 1920s, 1930s and even 1960s, the outcome during 1989-1992 might have been different. They could have learnt from the mistakes of their pre-war predecessors who demanded decentralization, but at the same time supported a common Czechoslovakia. For example, no political party in Slovakia, while facing the separatists, used the arguments of the prominent pre-war Slovak politician, Milan Hodža, who believed that the more Slovaks assumed authority over their own affairs, the more resistant Slovakia would be to populism and separatism.¹⁶⁸ By the same token, the democratically-minded Czechs seemed to be unaware of the fragility of Czech-Slovak relations from the writings of Ferdinand Peroutka, a distinguished Czech inter-war historian and journalist who in the early 1920s outlined accurately the fragility of the Czechoslovak coexistence that prevailed until after 1989.¹⁶⁹ Thus we can state that this lamentable state was a direct outcome of Communist indoctrination and propaganda in combination with the absence of reliable historical literature.

Hence, the historical experience of the two nations was concealed and therefore was not available after 1989. Thus, the Slovak and Czech liberal politicians after 1989

¹⁶⁸ In 1942 Hodža wrote: "Centralism might mortify the condition of [Czecho-Slovak] union. Regional self-government may, on the contrary, develop and fortify and consolidate it." in Federation in Central Europe op. Cit. p.86.

¹⁶⁹ See Ferdinand Peroutka: Budování Státu op.cit. esp. volume 2.

had to start again, unaware of the history of Czech-Slovak relations while immersed in the day-to-day politics of transformation in the atmosphere of haste and instability of the post-Communist transformation. It seems, in retrospect, that the new, inexperienced leaders lacked the skills to build a viable federation. They were not able to convince the Slovak voters about the deceptiveness of the separatists' arguments and promises. They could not find a language to which citizens would be able to respond. A common historical memory among the population that could have served as a defense mechanism to resist the populist temptation was absent. The Communists left a legacy to the political culture of Slovakia, which was characterized by a black and white view of the world, widespread ignorance and stereotypical thinking. Not even the initial goodwill between Czechs and Slovaks after the fall of Communism was enough to sustain a stable alliance; a friendship not based on deep-seated beliefs and values and mutual understanding is difficult to defend or endure. Suspicion, provocations and a lack of experience of how to build a lasting union, resulted in ambivalent feelings toward a common Czechoslovakia.

However, if Czechs poorly understood the divisions within Slovakia, one can hardly blame them. Slovaks themselves did not closely scrutinize their own history, and thus, after the end of Communism, their knowledge of their own history was very scanty. Slovaks had little opportunity after 1938 to engage in a broad debate about their past and their place in Czechoslovakia.¹⁷⁰ The absence of any dissident movement during the "Normalization" period and the scattering of Slovak democratic exiles prevented a debate about "white spots" in Slovakia's history, unlike the contrasting, cathartic debates that

¹⁷⁰ The exception were two brief periods interrupted at its start between 1945-1948, and shortly before the August 1968 invasion when the older generation, remembering the 1930s, were able to resume the debate about Czech-Slovak coexistence.

took place among Czech intellectuals.¹⁷¹ Although the official Communist history was as distrusted among the population as the regime's boastful promise of "glorious tomorrows", it had a damaging effect – a price which has been repaid dearly since 1989.¹⁷² With respect to the distortion of historical memory, the Communist regime did greater harm in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic – or, for that matter, Hungary or Poland – where a thriving parallel society existed during the Communist era.¹⁷³

The distorted Slovak historical consciousness after 1989 was strongly influenced by the views and literature – unavailable in Slovakia until the end of Communism – of post-World War II Slovak émigrés whose primary aim was to discredit the Czechs and to rehabilitate the existence of Hitler's puppet Slovak Republic of 1939-1945.¹⁷⁴ The success of the exiled separatists in winning popularity in Slovakia after November 1989 was limited considering the low support for the parties propagating their views.¹⁷⁵ Yet,

¹⁷¹ However, the focus of the extended debate among the Czech dissidents was conditioned by the Czech-German trauma rather than by the Czech-Slovak relationship.

¹⁷² On the complex issue of the state of political culture in Communist Czechoslovakia see H.G. Skilling: "Stalinism and Czechoslovak Political Culture" in R.C. Tucker ed.: Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation (1977, W.W. Norton, N.Y.; pp.257-282), A.Brown and G. Wightham: "Czechoslovakia: Revival and Retreat" in A. Brown & J. Gray eds.: Political Culture in Eastern Europe (1979, H&M Publ., N.Y.) and D.W. Paul: The Cultural Limits to Revolutionary Politics: Change and Continuity in Socialist Czechoslovakia (1979, Columbia University Press, N.Y.).

¹⁷³ See H. Gordon Skilling and Paul Wilson eds.: Civic Freedom in Central Europe: Voices from Czechoslovakia (1989, Macmillan, London) and Skilling's Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe (1989, Macmillan, London).

¹⁷⁴ For the assessment of this exile Slovak literature see Yeshayuha Jelinek: "A Whitewash in Colour: Revisionist Historiography in Slovakia" In *East European Jewish Affairs* 24:1 (1994) pp. 117-130.

¹⁷⁵ The Slovak National Party was not the only party propagating the Slovak State. In fact there were even more militant groups. But after repeated failures in the 1990 and 1992 elections, they faded away. See Rychlík op.cit., pp. 313-314.

while Communist historiography was fully discredited and objective historical literature absent, the liberal-democratic politicians could only counter the separatists' bogus evidence with their own stereotypes about Slovakia's past. Regrettably, Western academic literature could not furnish Slovaks with a more objective account of their history, as it did to a large degree for the Soviet Union and other former Communist societies. Western historiography of Slovakia, with some exceptions, was tainted with contradictions and inconsistencies stemming from a lack of available information, but primarily from views derived from the literature of the exiled Slovak separatists.¹⁷⁶

To sum up, the Communist regime's legacy was that neither Czechs nor Slovaks understood the complexity of their mutual past relationship. Their views were composed of a series of stereotypes and half-truths that filled the vacuum left by the "official history" of the Communist regime. For this reason, long-term, prevailing and legitimate problematic issues of Slovak-Czech coexistence did not directly affect the political climate during the transformation period (1989-1992) leading to the division of Czechoslovakia. Rather, it was the distortion and temporary suppression by the Communist regime of these unresolved and fragile issues of Slovak-Czech coexistence. The question remains to what extent the distortion of Czech and Slovak history endangered the process of democratization in Slovakia after 1989.

¹⁷⁶ See for example Stanislav J. Kirschbaum: A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival (1995, Macmillan, London) and Carol Skalnik Leff, C.: National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State 1918-1987 (1988, Princeton, New Jersey).

3. The 1989-1992 Transformation: Direct Cause of the Break-up

The lack of a blueprint for a systemic transformation from Communist regime to democracy, which causes mistakes by politicians and which in turn breeds uncertainty among the electorate, is a source of political instability. As Ralf Dahrendorf remarks, "the change is not only necessary but also threatening".¹⁷⁷ The problems of material hardship and general disorder call for careful steps in order to prevent popular unrest and a resultant backlash that can come in the form of a self-proclaimed saviour, promising quick solutions to complex and inherited problems present during any systemic change. As was argued in Chapter I., the literature on transformation from authoritarian rule to democracy is often relied upon to provide some guidelines to the nascent democracies in East-Central Europe.¹⁷⁸ However, the transformation from Communist regime to democratic rule is not comparable to the transformation from authoritarian to democratic rule. In general, authoritarian regimes have a market economy established before the change, while post-Communist regimes require a complete restructuring of the economy. The two-fold transformation in the political and economic spheres of post-Communist countries extends the challenges and increases uncertainty more than in post-authoritarian regimes, where only the political structure needs to be changed.

With the benefit of hindsight, some observers have identified a number of mistakes that should have been avoided in Czechoslovakia right at the beginning of the post-Communist period. They are convinced that the impasse could have been avoided if

¹⁷⁷ R. Dahrendorf: Reflections on the Revolution in Europe (1990, Times Books, N.Y.) p.122.

a new constitution had been enacted instead of patching up the old Communist one, or if the leaders of the Communist regime had been dealt with more radically. One can only speculate now how the outcome of events in Czechoslovakia would have been different had these obstacles been resolved right after the fall of the Communist regime. Still, it is useful to highlight these structural obstacles that caused politicians to make mistakes and provided space for the nationalist option to be realized during the Czechoslovak transformation.

The philosopher Daniel Kroupa, the former leader of a small but influential Czech party, Civic Democratic Alliance, wrote about the mistakes made by politicians after November 1989 that could, and perhaps should, have been avoided.¹⁷⁹ He sees the main reason for the break-up as the "majority clause" in both Houses of the Federal Czechoslovak Parliament inherited from the Communist era. This clause meant that a minority of Slovak deputies could block the action of the whole parliament.¹⁸⁰ If such a single-issue cause of the break-up sounds deterministic and rather simplistic, his other

¹⁷⁸ The most often cited source is: Guillermo A. O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, Laurence Whitehead, eds: Transformation from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies *op.cit.*

¹⁷⁹ Daniel Kroupa "Rozpadání Československa a návrat Českého státu" [The gradual collapse of Czechoslovakia and the return of the Czech state] published in Czech weekly *Literární Noviny* 3:28 (July 16-22, 1992; p.1,3); A similar argument is voiced in K. Mathernova article *op.cit.*; See also Czech constitutional lawyer Zdeněk Jičínský: "Ke ztroskotání Československého federalizmu" [Towards the collapse of Czechoslovak federalism] in R. Kipke and K Vodička eds. *op.cit.*, pp.67-82.

¹⁸⁰ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan also refer to this constitutional impasse and refer to H.G. Skilling who, as they write, "in his classic work on Czechoslovakia [*Interrupted Revolution*] had commented that the post-1968 constitution meant that a very small minority could bloc 'the ratification of the government's program and a vote of confidence in the government.' Skilling went on to note that the constitution did not really effect the [communist] party-state, which remained unitary. Since the party-state was in charge [1969-1989], the constitution was fictive." In "Political Identities and Electoral Sequences: Spain, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia" in *Daedalus* (Spring 1992) p. 330.

ideas are more tenable. Kroupa claims that, after a revolution, which is by definition the negation of the past, the Constitution of the former regime must be wholly abolished. Instead, Czechoslovakia's Communist Constitution was only amended and restructured, resulting in an unmanageable hybrid. There would have been no legal chaos after the suspension of the Constitution. Human relations and ethical standards would have remained unchanged. Preserving the rules of the former power structures, Kroupa argues, generated an impression that nothing had really changed. Only the elites were replaced.

Even more revealing is Kroupa's claim that politicians after 1989 should not have allowed Communists access to positions of power. They should have avoided being co-responsible for the development of the political process with the departing regime. If the new authorities were not ready to take over power themselves, Kroupa points out, they should have left it to someone else, because sharing power with the Communists resulted in a decrease in popular legitimacy. However, what he failed to notice was that those prominent Communists sharing power after 1989 were all Slovaks and were, as argued above, viewed differently than their Czech counterparts. Kroupa's recommendation for the radical axing of all Communists might be right in general, but it shows that even prominent Czech politicians had little knowledge of the conditions in Slovakia.

Structural problems and the lack of a plan for the transformation were objective obstacles that the inexperienced Czech and Slovak politicians faced after November 1989. Kroupa's observations show how little room for maneuver was available to the various political leaders who sought to preserve the federation. For this reason one has to be careful about blaming any single actor for the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Although

the blame is commonly laid on Mečiar and his followers, and on Slovak separatists, their action must be judged in the context of the limited alternatives available at the time. Further, the failure of the Czechoslovak federal government and President Václav Havel to stand up to the pressure of the separatists, was another factor accounting for the break-up of Czechoslovakia. The inability of Czech and Slovak leaders after 1989 to resolve the constitutional deadlock over almost three years, their refusal to call undemocratic behaviour by its real name, or to use force when required, was not an act of political restraint and a display of modesty. It was an invitation to the extremists to further escalate their aggressive behaviour. Indeed, the political leaders' preoccupation with trivial details when it was clear that a crisis threatened the existence of the state recalls the impasse that befell the Weimar Republic. They were obsessed with preserving the form of the constitutional state or *Rechtsstaat*¹⁸¹ without acknowledging that the constitutional structure of that constitutional state was vulnerable and defective.

4. The Two Camps

Let us examine the two opposing forces in the struggle for the fate of Czechoslovakia before the break-up. On one side stood Slovak nationalists and Mečiar's HZDS; on the other, Czech and Slovak intellectuals in their capacity as politicians. The Slovak nationalists, although openly hostile toward the Czechoslovak federation, faced surprisingly little resistance from the government and state authorities even when

¹⁸¹ The German term "*Rechtsstaat*" rather than "constitutional state" will be used here. Both both refer to a basic Weberian conception of the rule of law in the 19th century. There has been evolution in the understanding and development of the term. For example, Jürgen Habermas differentiates between the bourgeois, democratic constitutional, and the welfare state, all

committing criminal acts. Seeking to undermine the democratization process, they questioned the direction of economic transformation and stressed every negative effect of that process, especially economic inequality. As a separatist movement, they rejected the legitimacy of a common Czechoslovakia and denigrated the developments after November 1989. This extremism in itself would have been manageable if the government had not failed to act against the small but hostile pockets of Slovak nationalists. The reason was that there were no constitutional guidelines to follow; no clear boundaries as to what was permitted and forbidden. The nationalists, for example, could disturb public meetings with President Havel in Bratislava without any intervention on the part of the police. Such incidents, and the corresponding passivity of the government, occurred throughout the 1989-1992 period. One possible explanation for this passivity was the desire to avoid a parallel with the use of force by the Communist riot police on Wenceslas Square before November 1989.

However, there is another, more potent, explanation why the government at this time refused to act vigorously against the forces of separation. It is, in fact, shared with other post-Communist countries with multiple nationalities and ethnic minorities. For one, it is difficult for any government to find a way to treat secessionist movements. The other reason, closely connected, is the inadequacy of liberal democratic doctrine to deal with nationalism. Post-Communist regimes were faced with the problem of determining how much the state should yield to the demands of the minorities. According to Juan Linz, democratic theory and democratic practice "does not provide an easy answer to the

representing different manifestations of *Rechtsstaat* or the constitutional state. See The Theory of Communicative Action (1997, Beacon Press, Boston) pp. 356-361.

question of under what conditions secession is legitimate, inevitable, and viable".¹⁸² A minority or nationality can claim that it was only the previous totalitarian regime that kept various national units together as part of a greater unit. If such a group is not allowed to secede by the new regime, it "presents a serious problem for democratic transformation and even more serious problems for democratic consolidation".¹⁸³ Slovak nationalists formed such a disloyal opposition in Czechoslovakia claiming that Slovakia -- like Slovenia, Croatia, or Latvia -- should become independent after being liberated from Czech/Communist oppression. It did not matter that they spoke for a small minority of Slovaks, the point was that the inexperienced post-Communist government had no means of silencing them and no will to confront them. Also, liberal-democratic doctrine did not help in a showdown with the separatists.

Theory of liberalism provides post-Communist states with few guidelines on how to deal with minorities. Like Marxism, liberalism has been burdened with an anti-nationalist bias, because while nationalism deals with the particular, the two ideologies are framed in universal terms. As Shlomo Avineri observes:¹⁸⁴

[L]iberalism and Marxism, being offspring of the universalistic ideas of the enlightenment, have difficulties in perceiving and granting legitimacy to historical entities that cannot be subsumed under purely universal criteria. Even as the proletariat is central to Marx because it is universal criteria, so the market is for liberalism the epitome of universal modes of human conduct.

¹⁸² Juan J. Linz: The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, & Reequilibration (1978, The John Hopkins University Press, London) p.63.

¹⁸³ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan op.cit., p. 124.

¹⁸⁴ "Nationalism" in *Dissent*, Fall (1992) pp.456-7.

Each ideology, unable to accommodate nationalism, dealt with it on its own terms. Communism suppressed it while liberalism allowed nationalism to act within the constitutional and legal boundaries of the liberal state. Only if the nationalists overstep these boundaries and resort to violence and terrorism -- like the IRA in Northern Ireland or the Basque Separatists in Spain -- does a liberal-democratic state respond by treating nationalists as a criminal element, with violence. A separatist movement, insisting on its constitutional right of national self-determination, and especially after winning a referendum, must be allowed to separate by the liberal-democratic state. The break-up of Czechoslovakia, taking place without a referendum, and for that matter, without violence, shows how a liberal-democratic state, without firmly installed checks and balances, is vulnerable to disloyal opposition.

However, it was not the Slovak nationalists but Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (MDS) that was most responsible for the break-up of Czechoslovakia. How was it, then, that the MDS, although not claiming to be a separatist party, eventually fulfilled the program of the nationalists? To speak about MDS, we have to deal with its leader.

5. Emergence of the Minister of the Interior

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the core of the Public Against Violence movement (PAV) that replaced the old Communist guard after November 1989, due to its small size, insecurity and temporality of its position, sought new faces to replace, as much as possible, the old apparatchiks. The danger was that they could back and promote individuals utterly unknown to them. Perhaps the strangest nomination

during the first months after the fall of the Communist regime by the PAV leaders was that of the Minister of the Interior. It was evident that a new Minister must be from outside of the Ministry, yet someone who knew this most important post after any systemic change of power. They thus announced an open tender for the post as if running a commercial company!¹⁸⁵ There are stories of how one member of PAV entered the smoke-filled room of his blurry-eyed colleagues and declared that he had found the man. He was described as eager to work and knowing everything about the post of the Ministry of Interior; and the Prime Minister had already offered him the job! His knowledge of the mechanisms and structure of the Ministry of the Interior and the Secret Service was so impressive -- a suspicious fact in itself -- that he was given the post of Minister of the Interior¹⁸⁶. Had no one asked how this man could have known so much? A stunning episode that cost Slovakia dearly because the person selected for the post was none other than Vladimír Mečiar.

One has to realize that Mečiar was not a self-proclaimed popular hero, but a phenomenon generated by Slovak politics.¹⁸⁷ He appeared out of nowhere on the political scene joining, in March 1990, the leadership of the PAV, which was then the strongest political force in Slovakia. The sudden appearance of a political nobody on the

¹⁸⁵ See description of the selection of the Minister of Interior by one of the PAV leaders, Peter Zajac, admitting their naiveté. In I. Antalová ed.: op.cit., p.123.

¹⁸⁶Fedor Gál: Z prvej ruky [A First-Hand Account] (1991, Archa, Bratislava) pp.125-7.

¹⁸⁷ In the early 1960s Mečiar worked as a functionary in the Communist Youth Organization and studied a few years in the Soviet Union. In 1969 he was expelled from the Communist Party. Then he worked as a forestry worker and in the 1970s studied law part-time. Before 1989, he was a factory lawyer in a small town in central Slovakia. There is some unconfirmed evidence that Mečiar knew Dubček in the 1970s, or was even an ŠtB agent monitoring Dubček.

public stage was a symptom of the social and political fluidity in Slovakia after 1989. Following the first democratic elections in June 1990, he became the Prime Minister of the coalition government in Slovakia simply because other viable candidates -- mostly intellectuals -- declined the position.¹⁸⁸ He was perceived then as a dedicated and courageous man, a workaholic, and a good speaker and someone capable of facing the mounting opposition. During this period, he openly attacked nationalists for their separatist policies and was a great proponent of the Czechoslovak federation.

Despite his position as the Prime Minister of Slovakia since June 1990, Mečiar failed to become the leader of the PAV although he attempted to become one several times. After he had failed, he initiated the split of PAV. More and more frequently, Mečiar ran into conflict with his colleagues within the PAV as well as with the coalition partners in the government. Often turning to the public for support, he alarmed enough politicians to have himself removed from the position of Premier of Slovakia in Spring 1991 for the first time. Mečiar then split the PAV, and with his followers founded a new movement -- the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (MDS). Along with former PAV members, the leadership of the MDS comprised a number of ambitious and power-hungry newcomers: former Communist Party dignitaries, nationalists or simply opportunists sensing potential power. The most loyal to Mečiar were the so-called "offended" (*urazení*), who had been expelled from their professional or political posts after 1989 for a variety of reasons ranging from incompetence, to holding a Communist

¹⁸⁸ With respect to the election of Mečiar as the Prime Minister, the two most prominent dissidents in Slovakia -- Milan Šimečka and Miroslav Kusý -- found themselves in a tragic position. After much deliberation within the PAV closed circle, a candidate Šimečka recommended was Mečiar. (He regretted this decision within a few months, according to his son Martin M. Šimečka, In I. Antalová *op.cit.* p. 221. Miroslav Kusý was another candidate for the post of the PM but he declined his nomination, claiming he was unsuited for the job.

record, or having membership in the Communist State Security Police (ŠtB). Mečiar embraced them all, for his power depended on the sheer number of his supporters, not adherence to a set of ideological principles.

Embittered and vindictive toward the political leaders who had deposed him in 1991, Mečiar gradually turned MDS into a disloyal opposition, successfully subverting through the Federal Parliament the functioning of the federation. His attacks on the economic and social policies of the Slovak government were a form of crafty populism that scored popularity points at a time of social and political uncertainty. He did not clearly outline his own solution to the economic and social crisis, but blamed Czech and Slovak politicians in power not only for the mistakes they committed, but also for the inevitable negative effects of the post-Communist transformation. During the 1992 election campaign, Mečiar remained an enigma to many voters, voicing the ills of the society yet unwilling to state where he would lead Slovakia if he won. A warning that appeared before the elections in a Slovak daily spoke of the confusion that was caused by Mečiar's electoral campaign: "The majority of Slovaks do not think, believe or have a clue that those whom they plan to elect will bring about the end of Czechoslovakia".¹⁸⁹

In contrast to the leadership of the MDS, the grassroots supporters reflected a broad spectrum of opinions and interests. For many of them, Mečiar's populist slogans promising to compensate for the economic hardship of the transformation, blurred the separatist potential of the MDS. More than anything else, their vote for Mečiar was a vote showing genuine indignation towards the pre-June 1992 Federal and Slovak coalition governments, blaming them for the political, economic and social chaos and

¹⁸⁹ *Národná Obroda* April 7, 1992.

slow pace of the constitutional negotiations. So, for many of Mečiar's supporters, there was no conflict between their vote for the MDS and their support for a common Czechoslovakia. If they had wanted an independent Slovakia, they would have voted for the Slovak Nationalist Party which openly called for the division of Czechoslovakia. Their vote for Mečiar was, in their view, a vote in favour of social security and a guarantee of the employment they had enjoyed in the Communist era. In return, Mečiar, as a good populist, had no problem promising to resolve all the ills of the society. It would also put in power, in the minds of his supporters, a charismatic Slovak leader, capable of facing the Czech leaders in tough constitutional negotiations.

One of the keys to Mečiar's success lay in concealing his own plans of how to solve Slovakia's economic and social problems, as well as how to deal with the relationship with the Czech Republic. It is doubtful if he ever had a clearly designed program or strategy. Rather, he always followed his acute political intuition and reacted to events as they came. He became popular for his charisma, but mainly because he was gradually, as his popularity was increasing, saying and promising to the disturbed society what it wanted to hear. Anti-Czech nationalist rhetoric combined with a staple populist tirade promising high wages and low, controlled prices, along with low taxes and plenty of cash from the state budget for social programs, pensions, etc.

Like most populists, the only rule he ever seemed to follow was the pursuit and retention of power regardless of the means used. His suspected co-operation with the Secret Police before 1989 fueled his resoluteness to do anything to avert his downfall. Seeing the danger of being "screened" and thus removed from power, he moved from a pro-federalist position to a separatist one. Only in an independent Slovakia, under his

leadership, would all the suspicion about his past be overlooked. Thus, without being a stern nationalist, he was the main force behind the split of Czechoslovakia.

6. Opposition to Mečiar

It was up to Mečiar's opponents before the 1992 elections to expose his demagoguery and to convince Slovak voters that there are no simple solutions or shortcuts to prosperity. The group that failed to stand up resolutely against Mečiar's rise to power were the Czech and especially Slovak intellectuals. Many of the intellectuals had been hurled into power after November 1989, filling the vacuum left after the demise of the Communist regime. They had no experience in day-to-day politics and generally were not suited to lead a society in crisis. Their action confirmed Linz's observation; that intellectuals are unwilling to accept bureaucratic discipline and the rigidity of modern mass parties that reduce their influence.¹⁹⁰ Having an instinctive dislike for professional politicians, an intellectual in the PAV movement often tries to avoid becoming one. This trait was evident among Slovak intellectuals who turned to politics after the November 1989 revolution. Stressing moral values and decency in politics, and relying on their political opposition to engage in reasonably fair political tactics, they created a trap for their own political future.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Linz *The Breakdown...* *op.cit.*, pp. 47-48.

¹⁹¹ Fedor Gál, the leader of the PAV movement in 1990-1991 responded in 1999 to a query by a journalist regarding his reluctance as the leader of PAV to take political responsibility in his own hands. Gál: "They ask me this continuously. So I will be frank with you. You cannot imagine what one single day meant at the PAV headquarters: sitting from morning until evening being under constant pressure. There were not only visits by Ambassadors, official visits, meetings with representatives of other parties, there were also meetings with tens of individuals from factories, cooperatives, cities and villages. And there were only a few of us because the

The Slovak and Czech intellectuals in power made a crucial mistake in the uneven way they treated the leaders of the old regime. On the one hand, their motto was, "We are not like them!", which in practice meant that the Communist leaders were not prosecuted or in any way made responsible for their past actions. At first glance, it seemed to make sense not to become entangled in the past and to get on with the future, especially in Slovakia, where many of those in power were tainted by the Communist regime.¹⁹² On the other hand, the federal government introduced, after many delays, a controversial Screening Law; this law suspended anyone found on the State Security Police list as an informer or agent, from being employed in civil service for a period of five years. It was a well-intended but damaging move for post-Communist leaders to weed out old "nomenclature" from middle-rank governmental positions. Damaging, because the unreliable State Security Police records were used to dismiss some petty bureaucrats, while at the same time a Minister of the last Communist regime, Marian Čalfa, remained the Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia. In addition, the reluctance on the part of the government to implement the Screening Law was perceived by many as an exercise in political intimidation rather than a delayed search for justice. It furnished

others were sitting in the Parliament or the Ministries, and we did not see each other for the whole day. Parliament, government plus the internal organization of the PAV – that was unmanageable. Besides, at that time I was still a child of the past – I did not trust politics and I was against concentrating executive, legislative and judiciary powers, all in one pair of hands. In fact, I was not eager to become a professional politician. After all, I saw myself as a sociologist, prognostic, a person who, once this storm is over, once professional politicians take over, would return to his own civic profession. Today I realize that I was mistaken." In *Slovo* 20-26 October, 1999.

¹⁹² O'Donnell and Schmitter, studying this aspect of transformation of post-authoritarian regimes, disagree. They claim that "The worst of bad solutions would be to ignore the issue" of atrocities committed by the rulers of the old regimes. It would provoke the justified indignation of the former victims. These victims might ask why they should grant political support and legitimacy to a regime that is unable to come to terms with the most painful elements of its own past. *op. cit.*, p.24.

Mečiar with the opportunity to further discredit the law, by calling it a tool for a witch-hunt against him and his supporters.

In 1991, we can notice a pattern in Slovak politics that has been repeated several times since then – political leaders misusing their power and transgressing the law have not been prosecuted. The case of Mečiar during the 1990s is exemplary. The reason for removing Mečiar in 1991 from his post as the PM was due to his evident misuse of power (handling the ŠtB files) and confrontational style of politics. The report of the Security and Defense Committee of the Slovak Parliament¹⁹³ clearly stated that Mečiar acted against the law, yet he was not prosecuted. To the contrary, he was allowed to run in the next elections and, after winning them, did everything not to be removed again. Indeed, the coalition government of Prime Minister Ján Čarnogursky, which deposed Mečiar in the 1991, failed to prevent his second rise to power. They could have easily anticipated that Mečiar's comeback would not only alter Slovakia's relationship with the Czech Republic, but would also undermine the fragile democratization process in Slovakia.

The Slovak government's inept handling of Mečiar illustrates an observation made by Linz in his study of the breakdown of democratic regimes. Linz points out that when a populist or extremist is allowed to gain the support of a large segment of the population, it "is generally a reflection of a failure of the democratic leadership".¹⁹⁴ Had there been enough determination on the side of Čarnogursky's government, Mečiar could have been removed before the June 1992 elections. His alleged co-operation with the Communist ŠtB and his ordering of the removal of secret documents from the

¹⁹³ See the report by and interview with František Javorský, the chairman of the Slovak National Council investigation committee, in *Slovenský Východ* March 23, 1992.

archives of the Ministry of the Interior could have served as a credible pretext.¹⁹⁵ Although the final report by the government's investigation committee concerning Mečiar's political conduct in fact confirmed that he had ordered the removal and transfer to his residence of State Security Police documents, the reaction of Čarnogursky's government illustrates their lack of will to confront Mečiar. Responding to a journalist who asked whether he was convinced of Mečiar's guilt, Čarnogursky confirmed that the evidence was overwhelming, but he refused to order the Attorney General to initiate criminal investigations. Even more ineptly, Čarnogursky indicated that his decision was politically motivated¹⁹⁶. In the end, although Čarnogursky and his government were counting on public outrage after the revelation of the accusations against Mečiar, the outcome was exactly the opposite. Mečiar gained even more popularity: some Slovaks saw the government's action as a last ditch attempt to compromise Mečiar, and many suspected that the government had failed to press charges because of the weakness of the evidence against Mečiar.

One reason for this reluctance to press charges against Mečiar was that any trial of a politician could have been viewed as a political trial – yet another legacy of the Communist era, specifically show trials from the 1950s. Another reason might have been simply lack of knowledge by post-communist democratic leaders that their responsibility is also to protect the *Rechtsstaat*. That requires that they follow the letter of law, and not emotions and fears when a culprit is a highly popular politician simply because his

¹⁹⁴ Linz *ibid* p.12.

¹⁹⁵ See the interview with František Javorský, *op.cit.*

prosecution might bring popular wrath against the protectors of law. In 1994 when Mečiar was removed for the second time, again he was allowed to run in general elections in September 1994. Worse still, after the 1998 elections, there was evidence that MDS and the Slovak Intelligence Agency (SIS) had been involved in criminal activities, embezzlement and the worst sort of political jingoism. Yet Mečiar was again left unpunished and in charge of powerful MDS.

7. Václav Havel and Václav Klaus

Perhaps the most paradoxical position in the break-up of Czechoslovakia belongs to Václav Havel. As a former dissident and as a thinker, he won respect in Czechoslovakia and abroad. His civic courage before November 1989 was matched only by his sincere approach to politics as the President of Czechoslovakia. Can we then say that he failed as a politician because he was not able to find a *modus operandi* during the period of his leadership for the cause he cherished so dearly, a common Czechoslovakia? The following is only a provisional evaluation of a complex role played by Havel in the break-up of Czechoslovakia.

It is important to note that Havel was not able to find a way to save Czechoslovakia despite the fact that he did everything he considered possible. The main reason for this failure was his approach to politics. Havel believed that, as President of Czechoslovakia, he would be able to stimulate political and social relations based on moral principles. After his resignation in July 1992 when it was clear that the federation is going to split, Havel confirmed his position: "My conviction about the moral basis of

¹⁹⁶ See interview in daily *Národná obroda*, May 4, 1991.

politics has not changed. On the contrary, all my experience from the world of high politics confirms again the validity of my view".¹⁹⁷ How then do we judge an intellectual who failed politically yet stuck to his moral principles?

During the 1970s and 1980s, Havel managed to maintain his own moral standards in the midst of the openly immoral and hostile society of Communist Czechoslovakia, as a civil rights activist and the *spiritus movens* of the dissident movement. "Living in truth" was a way to preserve and protect individual moral standards. It was not a slogan intended to promote the overthrow of the Communist government, but rather a method to preserve one's own personal integrity facing one of the most reactionary Communist regimes. Havel and other dissidents had made themselves immune to the regime's physical or mental pressure to control them. This was in stark contrast to the plight of the majority of the population that the Communist regime managed to subdue and silence. The Czech dissidents, without wishing it, served the rest of the indolent population as a bad conscience.

Havel's situation changed dramatically after 1989 when he became the leader of a society that, after forty years of Communism, was eager to rebuild a democratic regime. However, his insistence on maintaining moral purity often prevented him from distinguishing what was possible, attainable and necessary in politics. In order to maintain stability, politics often requires a leader to use extreme measures or even force, while sometimes a dialogue or negotiations will suffice to achieve the Aristotelian "golden mean".¹⁹⁸ It is essential for a political leader, especially in an unstable society,

¹⁹⁷ An interview with Adam Michnik, *Lidové Noviny* September 11, 1992; p.7.

¹⁹⁸ Aristotle: Nichomachean Ethics Book Two, Chapters 7-9.

to show determination in order to maintain effectively law and order. However, such *Realpolitik* would have compromised Havel's philosophical stance and thus he refused to go beyond a certain line. There was a price to pay for such a position. As Bernard Crick in his study of Machiavelli states:¹⁹⁹

There are times when it is necessary to do admittedly evil things for the preservation and the welfare of the political community – and if one is not so willing, one is simply stepping outside politics and, incidentally, abandoning it to those who have no scruples....

There are two crucial instances where Havel might have succeeded had he taken a more assertive political stand. First, as already discussed, was with respect to the treatment of the Slovak separatists. With the help of his pro-federal colleagues in Slovakia he could have dealt more resolutely with the tiny minority of hostile Slovak nationalists immediately after 1989. Second, Havel could have insisted on the expansion of his limited presidential powers, at least until the democratic Constitution replaced the surviving Communist Constitution. One can argue that for several months after December 1989 when he became the President, he possessed enough authority, legitimacy and power to initiate any political change necessary, for example, change the structure of the Federal Parliament designed in 1969. Had he then persisted more forcefully, it is very likely he would have succeeded. There were no defiant, self-interested opponents immediately following the rapid breakdown of the Communist regime. By Spring 1992, when Havel tried desperately to wrench some power from the dysfunctional Federal Parliament, it was too late.

¹⁹⁹ Bernard Crick "So Many Machiavellis", Introduction to Niccolo Machiavelli's The Discourses (1988, Penguin Classics, London) p.67.

The question remains, could Havel have anticipated soon after November 1989 the magnitude of the future crisis? There are two responses to this question. One, denigrating Havel, is in line with Crick's observation of allowing thanks to his inaction to acquire power by those "who have no scruples". The other sees Havel's role as more complicated. If there was no anticipation of the break-up until a few months before the June 1992 elections, and if even those who brought about the break-up, as has been argued, had no plan or intention of the division of the country, how could Havel have foreseen the events? There was nothing inevitable that Havel could sense and halt after he became the President. What is puzzling is that both views, denigrating and exonerating Havel, seem to be valid. No doubt, a topic for a comprehensive analysis.

The other important figure during the Czechoslovak transformation period was the former Federal Minister of Finance and later the Czech Premier, Václav Klaus. An energetic, tough and skillful politician, an economist by trade, he was in many respects the opposite of the thoughtful and visionary Havel. Timothy Garton Ash's first-hand account of Klaus at the beginning of his political career in November 1989 is apt: "[He is] as arrogant as he is clever".²⁰⁰ Klaus's priorities were always clear: introduce a market economy, privatize as quickly as possible, keep inflation low, and become a political leader. Confident about his plan for the transformation from Communism, he presented democracy and a market economy as the same thing; create the latter and you automatically get the former. What was troubling about Klaus was his absolute

²⁰⁰ T. Garton Ash: We the People: The Revolution of 89 (1990, Granta Books - Penguin, Cambridge; p. 87).

confidence in, and adherence to, the policy of economic shock therapy.²⁰¹ He did not appear willing to consider alternative policies of economic transformation of the whole Czechoslovakia.

Although Klaus supported the preservation of the federation while he was federal Finance Minister, he made no effort to be more sensitive to the problems being experienced in Slovakia. Fedor Gál, the first leader of the PAV, blamed Klaus for not responding to the aspirations of the majority of Slovaks who wanted to build a viable federation with Czechs.²⁰² Could it be that Klaus was not aware of the distinct conditions in Slovakia? As Radoslav Selucký wrote, one year before the fall of Communism: "Owing to its rapid socialist industrialization, Slovakia is now industrially developed but not genuinely modernized, let alone efficient".²⁰³ Klaus seemed to overlook the fact that more favourable economic conditions and higher foreign investment made the transformation to a market economy more bearable in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia. Clearly, equal treatment and open economic competition after 1989 did not guarantee the same economic performance in the unequally developed republics. Scaling down the armaments industry, which happened to be concentrated in central Slovakia, coupled with the further threat of closing unprofitable factories and the resulting high unemployment, was the result of Klaus's austere economic policies and, at

²⁰¹ See Chapter I (section 4).

²⁰² J. Klusakova and F. Gal: op.cit., p.43.

²⁰³ Selucký in H.G. Skilling ed.: Czechoslovakia... op.cit., p.168.

the same time, the source of Mečiar's electoral support.²⁰⁴ It thus seems that for Klaus, determined to continue the rapid pace of economic reform, Slovakia had become an annoying burden, draining state coffers and potentially jeopardizing the overall reform process. Once Slovakia had been perceived as a liability to Klaus, after the June 1992 elections when Mečiar won the elections in Slovakia, he was eager to shed that burden by dividing Czechoslovakia.

Finally, very damaging for Czech and Slovak relations has been an initial feeling among many anti-Mečiar Slovaks that the Czechs have forsaken them, and Klaus figures prominently on their list.²⁰⁵ The statements by some Czechs, asserting with false compassion that they understand the Slovak century-long aspiration to achieve independence, (as expressed during the June 1992 elections), left many Slovak intellectuals puzzled and embittered. "We don't deserve such treatment," wrote Ladislav Kováč, "and the future will not be forgiving".²⁰⁶

To conclude, the *raison d'être* for an independent Slovakia was not the preservation of the Slovak nation nor was it the realization of a long-awaited act of self-determination. There are at least three evident reasons that run contrary to the view that the break-up of Czechoslovakia was inevitable:

²⁰⁴ Unemployment figures in both republics were indicative: 2-3% in the Czech Republic and 11-12% in Slovakia. Not surprisingly, blue-collar workers and less educated electors were the main group supporting the HZDS during the June 1992 elections. See J. Pehe "Czechoslovakia's 1990-1992 Balance Sheet" in *Radio Free Europe/RL* 1:25 (19 July 1992) pp. 24-31.

²⁰⁵ Ladislav Kováč: "Čo sa stalo a čo robit?" [What has happened and what is to be done?] *Kultúrny život*, 39 (1992) p.7.

²⁰⁶ L. Kováč *ibid.*

1) The Slovak Nationalist Party, the only major party to demand separation before June 1992, was never a major political force in Slovakia. Its popularity remained consistently at less than ten per cent.

2) Mečiar's did not see separation as the only option, even after his electoral victory in June 1992.²⁰⁷ Its conditions for a common state were: control over federal monetary policies, the imposition of trade barriers, slowing down privatization in Slovakia, and the retention of a large state sector. Only after their demands were not met by the Czech politicians led by the Premier, Václav Klaus, did MDS opt for separation.

3) From November 1989 until December 1992 all opinion polls in Slovakia indicated more support for a common state than for an independent Slovakia.²⁰⁸ The polls also indicated that there was little or no feeling of resentment towards Czechs among the Slovak population. Thus, both Mečiar and Klaus refused to hold a referendum concerning the future of Czechoslovakia because they knew that they might not gather enough support for dismantling the federation.

Thus, the majority of Slovaks were not for the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Neither was Mečiar's separate course simply a different view of the pace of economic reform in Czechoslovakia. Rather, it was an expression, the embodiment of the unique experience of the Slovaks during the two decades before November 1989. In fact,

²⁰⁷ Roman Zelenay, a HZDS negotiator with the Czechs, remarked that Klaus's refusal of HZDS's proposal and his determination to swiftly divide the country caught the HZDS by surprise. It was reiterated by high functionary of the MDS, Milan Kňažko, who also remarked in 1998 that they had not anticipated the break-up. Rychlík *op. cit.*, p. 340. See also an interview with Mečiar for *Le Monde* (July 7, 1992, p.4) where he declares: "We did not want the independence, we were pushed into it".

²⁰⁸ See the surveys of the Centre for Social Analysis: Aktuálne problémy Česko-Slovenské--január 1992 [Current Czech and Slovak problems] and Slovensko pred voľbami--apríl 1992 [Slovakia before the election] both: (1992, Center for Social Analysis FOCUS, Bratislava).

Mečiar's grassroots supporters represented a diffuse spectrum of opinions, interests and expectations, and were often unaware of the consequences of their support for MDS.

The newly independent Slovakia that was declared on January 1, 1993, under Mečiar's leadership, was internationally accepted as a *fait accompli*, but international recognition was only slowly forthcoming. Mečiar and his supporters claimed that the break-up of Czechoslovakia was nothing but the "natural process of Slovakia's self-determination". Even if we were to take their words at face value, the chances that Mečiar could succeed personally in the long term were, from the onset, dim. His regime embarked on a course that was difficult to stop and even harder to redirect to a more calm political environment. Taking over the program of the Slovak separatists, MDS's position within the political spectrum was clearly set. Creating an independent Slovakia without receiving a democratic mandate in the referendum that was promised but never held and against the wish of democratic forces in Slovakia, Mečiar staying in power could have been secured only by venturing into more undemocratic practices. Although officially the MDS, throughout its governance, had stressed its wish to enter the European Union and NATO, its domestic policy of securing power at any cost was to make Slovakia an unsuitable candidate to these organizations. This, in turn, forced the MDS into a more reserved position *vis-a-vis* the West. In contrast, improving relations and drifting slowly towards Russia had been not an expression of preserving the balance between the East and the West, but an urge not to stay isolated in the future.

Review

It has been argued in this chapter that the break-up of Czechoslovakia was the result of post-Communist turmoil created by the lingering legacy of Communist era. The Communist indoctrination and especially absence of objective history texts or any debate about pernicious issues of the Czech and Slovak history resulted in misconceptions and ignorance among both Czech and Slovak citizens of their own complicated history. An account of the two different experiences during the 1969-1989 "Normalization" period in both societies allowed us to trace the origin of the breakdown of democratization in Slovakia, which in turn set the stage for the break-up of Czechoslovakia. If we consider Slovakia prior to the split, we can see that populist and nationalist governments managed to utilize difficult post-communist conditions in Slovakia. The populists promised better social and economic conditions if elected; the majority of the population was willing to forsake liberal democracy for the prospect of economic and social security – a false option indeed. It was also discussed that the impact of the Communist State Security Police files was responsible for the sharp turn of Mečiar's position with respect to the existence of Czechoslovakia. An independent Slovakia guaranteed relative security for his position. Presented were the two camps within Slovakia that fought for and against the break-up of Czechoslovakia. It was clear that the failure of Slovak liberals to stop Mečiar – despite clearly seeing that he was leading Slovakia on an undemocratic course – was due to the huge popularity he enjoyed thanks to his populist policies and rhetoric.

Chapter V

Independent Slovakia 1993-1998

Overview

This chapter examines the reasons and the process of establishing illiberal democracy in Slovakia after 1993. The deterioration of conditions in Slovakia after 1993 was a sad but, in a way, expected development following the break-up of Czechoslovakia. It seemed that the negative experience during the period of Normalization 1969-1998, prevailing nationalism and populism combined with traditional passivity of the Slovak population would drift Slovakia away from the course of its reforming neighbours. Especially, when the third Mečiar government after 1994 treated its opponents and those that deserted him with ever deeper disrespect, the situation seemed ominous. Yet within five years of Slovakia's independence, events took an unexpected turn – illiberal democracy, despite all odds, was resisted by Slovak society. Something snapped during the course of these years. A vigorous civil society emerged unwilling to accept further marginalization of Slovakia which was ousted, in 1996, from a group of countries that were the first wave candidates for entering NATO and the EU.

Introduction

The political development prior to the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the way it was executed predetermined the course of events after 1993. What surprised most observers was not the deterioration itself – that was anticipated considering the antidemocratic nature of Mečiar's regime – but rather the speed with which Slovakia fell into the category of an illiberal democracy. Since he became the Premier of Slovakia in 1990, Mečiar had formed three governments; however, it was only when he came to power for the third time in November 1994 that, in comparison with his previous governments, the political condition worsened the most radically. Slovakia afterwards

resembled Belarus or Ukraine more than its central European neighbours with whom it was still grouped in the Vishegrad Four (along with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary).

The primary task in this chapter is to examine the rise of illiberal democracy and provide reasons why developments in Slovakia deteriorated to the point that it was on the brink of becoming an authoritarian regime. To what extent was it predetermined by historical conditions, the political culture and to what extent was it due to contingent development of post-communist transformation. To what extent was it the work of Vladimír Mečiar, and what was the driving force behind his policies. One perception in Slovakia has been that his role was decisive, and that it was his decision and policies that radicalized and divided the whole society and eventually plunged it into political and economic crisis. A number of Western social scientists are split, some blame Mečiar *in toto* for all the ills of Slovakia.²⁰⁹ Others are more reluctant to accept the pre-eminent role of one person and try to enlist other objective and historical reasons for explaining why the majority in Slovakia was either supportive of, or tacit towards, Mečiar's policies.²¹⁰ Indeed, there remains a nagging question: why did a politician, so flagrantly

²⁰⁹ Sabine P. Ramet writes that "I believe that differences in political leadership suffice to account for most of the differences between these two [Czech and Slovak] republics in their post-communist transitions. To put it simply, where Czech Republic has had Havel and Klaus to guide it in its initial years after decommunization, Slovakia has had Mečiar, a former boxer (*sic*), former communist, and highly charismatic populist." In S. P. Ramet: "The Struggle for Collective Rights in Slovakia" In S.R.Ramet: Whose Democracy? Nationalism, religion, and the Doctrine of Collective Rights in Post-1989 Eastern Europe (1997, Rowman & Littlefield Publ., Lanham) pp. 127-8.

²¹⁰ Judy Batt writes about crisis of identity among Slovaks as the main reason for faltering democratization process and economic transformation. In J. Batt: The New Slovakia: National Identity, Political Integration and the Return to Europe (1996, Discussion Paper 65; Royal Institute of International Affairs, London) p.35.

misusing power and undermining democratic practice, remain so popular for so long? This is a question that seems to be a leitmotif for a number of post-communist societies.

In the first part we will examine the chronology of events and give an account of how illiberal democracy emerged in Slovakia. It will show to what extent the post-communist transformation itself conditioned this development. In the second part we explore the gradual radicalization of Mečiar rule, in particular on the relationship with his allies and especially the President of Slovakia. In the third part, we will follow developments after 1994 when the policies of Mečiar's third government gradually led to policies of breaking of the *Rechtsstaat* and international isolation of Slovakia. Finally, we will assess the gradual shift in Slovak political culture that took place during this period -- a development that is of immense importance for examining the dynamics of illiberal democracy. In fact, it will be argued that it was the shift within Slovakia's political culture that conditioned the outcome of the 1998 elections.

1. The First Months of Independence

A newly created country requires not only a solid political, economic and social infrastructure, but also ideological direction and a tone must be set for nation-building. This was particularly true for Slovakia - a newly emerging country in the midst of the post-communist transformation that was involved in a triple level transformation (as defined by Klaus Offe), effecting nationhood, constitution-making along with the "normal politics" of allocation. Indeed, in Slovakia, as Offe anticipated, "everything - boundaries, rights, procedures, and the allocation of power, legal rights, and material resources -- was argued for and advocated in consequentialist terms, and not on the basis

of historical antecedents and principles of justice, freedom and peace".²¹¹ This argument is also reflected by a sociologist, Barbara A. Misztal, who writes about post-communist societies in transformation in general, but is even more valid for countries that were newly formed. She argues that these societies "are deeply involved in the power-struggle over which group will be able to determine the collective identity, the definition of the nation and the state".²¹² In Slovakia this "power-struggle" continued from 1989 but even more intensely after 1993 between those who saw Slovakia as part of a central European, western oriented civilization, trying to build liberal democracy, and those who based their collective identity on the memory of nationalistic pride and valour. The more "western oriented" were also for the preservation of Czechoslovakia, for speedy integration into NATO and the EU; the nationalistically oriented were frequently anti-western and often wished to adopt values and policies related to the war-time clerofascist Slovak state. The former set the stage for Slovakia after November 1989, the latter got their chance in the independent Slovakia after 1993. The development in independent Slovakia during 1993-1998 can also be viewed through this "power-struggle" between these two disparate civilizational constellations.

After Slovakia became independent in 1993, the new direction was set by minor Slovak Nationalist Party (SNP) and not by Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (MDS) which was in command of the political scene. The MDS was a strictly populist party whose sole aim was to gain and maintain power, and had no ideological preconception about the nature of nation building. It was a typical case, what Charles

²¹¹ See Claus Offe: Varieties of Transition op.cit., p.27.

Fairbanks calls "an antipolitical party" which as opposite to Lefties Parties or Fascist parties in the past, did "not seek a new system or order". They rebel against the existing system, are anti-liberal in nature, yet lack any comprehensive political program²¹³. The MDS thus appropriated the ideology of its ultra-nationalist junior partner, the Slovak National Party which defined its existence and that of Slovakia in negative terms. The SNP spokesman welcomed an independent Slovakia with these words: "After a thousand years of struggle, the Slovaks are finally free." The SNP was and remains openly anti-Czech, anti-Hungarian, and at times anti-Western and antisemitic. In addition, it wished to see the wartime Fascist regime as the legitimate predecessor of a Slovakia emerging in 1993. The MDS refused to accept such an overt connection and was aware of international implications to affix Slovakia with an era that was against everything the EU stood for and that was, in its nature, openly antidemocratic. However, there was no disagreement between MDS and SNP regarding implementing measures that, on the surface, were not connected with the war-time regime but were in the spirit of that regime's policies: state paternalism, restriction of freedom of expression, control of media and restriction of the power of the judiciary. They also needed a real or imaginary enemy in order to justify all these antidemocratic policies. Before 1993, for the SNP the Czechs were a perfect target of a colonial nation depriving Slovakia of its deserved freedom and robbing it of its material and spiritual riches. After 1993 its target became the Hungarian minority whose role and position we will assess in the next chapter. Hence, Slovak

²¹² Barbara A. Misztal: "Postcommunist ambivalence: becoming of a new formation?" in *European Journal of Sociology* 37:1 (1996) p.128

²¹³ Charles H. Fairbanks Jr.: "Antipolitics, East and West", a paper prepared for presentation at the Vienna Dialogue on Democracy, July 1994; pp.1-2.

nationalists mainly provided the ideological blueprint for the establishment of illiberal democracy in Slovakia. This should be kept in mind while recounting the concrete steps and measures that led to the formation of this regime.

We can divide the period after Slovakia became independent into three periods during which Mečiar's government ruled continuously until 1998 except for six months in 1994. The first period dates from the creation of an independent Slovakia to the fall of Mečiar's government in March 1994. Slovakia entered its independence governed by a populist-nationalist coalition elected for four years in June 1992 (Appendix 1). This coalition drafted and passed the Slovak Constitution, elected the President (a member of MDS), nominated Judges to the Constitutional and Supreme Courts and enjoyed absolute, although not constitutional majority (3/5) in the Slovak Parliament. In addition, Mečiar and his MDS were continually popular among the voters. Thus the scene seemed to be set for a period dominated and controlled by MDS and its main ally, the Slovak National Party. Yet the government lasted only until March 1994 when it was ousted with a "no confidence" vote by the opposition parties assisted by some runaway MPs from the government coalition. The second period thus represents the rule of interim government of a broad coalition of parties that agreed to call early general elections for September of that year. The third period represents the whole electoral period from 1994 until the election in September 1998. The 1994 elections were won again by MDS, but far from winning a percentage to form a government on its own. It took two months before it formed a broader, and seemingly unstable, coalition again with nationalist SNP and a new Workers Party (Appendix 1). Surprisingly, this on the surface unstable government survived for four years. The period was marked by the government coalition's worst

excesses against the democratic conduct, the constitution and the rule of law. The reason for this "survival" of government was Mečiar's implementation of such cunning policies that made accomplices of his coalition partners in the creation of illiberal democracy in Slovakia.

During the first period, 1993-1994, the independent Slovakia became quite unstable, and it was only partially due to the natural turbulence caused by the technicality of the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Neither was it due to the opposition parties that only slowly accepted and absorbed its new position within an independent state. A state that was created either without the initiative of some, or against the will of other of these opposition parties. Paradoxically, the instability was mostly the result of the tension within the government coalition. It was based on a disagreement over the path Slovakia should be heading, the treatment of opposition and finally due to personal disagreements between Mečiar and his colleagues from the MDS. This confrontation was rather surprising considering that MDS, with its ally SNP, barely had a majority in the parliament, and a departure of any one of the MDS Member of Parliament from the coalition would endanger the survival of the whole government.²¹⁴ Mečiar disregard of these considerations showed his lack of understanding of the mechanism and rules according to which a parliamentary democracy operates. As a populist, he believed that his position within MDS as a one-man party, and his popularity, legitimized him to obtain powers that did not belong to the post of Prime Minister. For example, in 1991, when he was first ousted as the Prime Minister, the polls indicated nearly 80 per cent support for him. He simply could not grasp that, considering his high popularity among the citizens,

²¹⁴ In fact, MDS had only 74 MPs (so less than a half from the 150 Members of Parliament).

he could be deposed by his opponents who did not enjoy the same popularity as he was. He perceived his dismissal as something undemocratic and unjust and he was especially merciless towards those who opposed him but obtained their position thanks to him.

Let us first discuss Mečiar's confrontations with those politicians who were first his allies but simply by their new designated position obtained power and independence that was outside the influence of the Prime Minister. This was actually the case in all post-communist societies where, after the fall of communist regimes, democratic rules were being set while those who set them were supposed to follow them. This provided space for a great degree of manipulation and abuse of power. In the independent Slovakia, these new rules were being set anew by the Prime Minister, because the new political structure had to replace the vacuum left after the end of Czechoslovakia. Indeed, Mečiar picked not as partners, but as subservient "executors of his will" the MDS candidates for Parliament, the Ministers of the government, the President, the Constitutional and Supreme Courts members and the whole state apparatus. He would recall or dismiss anyone who showed any sign of independence. If it was someone in executive position and thus the removal required the approval of the Parliament, he threatened to resign if that or another individual was not dismissed. Considering himself the father of independent Slovakia, he could hardly bear any democratic check and balancing that would restrict his power. Mečiar simply refused to accept this key mechanism protecting democracy where the system deliberately prevents an interdependent and hierarchical relationship among the executive, judicial and legislative powers -- the three institutions that must be independent if they are to protect the rule of law in a democratic society.

Thus the biggest obstacle to his rule were two democratic institutions -- the President and the Constitutional Court -- protected by Slovak Constitution and hence independent from abuse by executive power. They were nominated to their position by Mečiar as his allies and trusted individuals but once in their position they became independent and thus not subservient to Mečiar. Subsequently, they refused to "execute" his orders and ceased to comply with his antidemocratic policies. One, perhaps the most important, reason for the establishment of illiberal democracy in Slovakia was due to repeated attempts to oust the President and the defiance of the decisions of the Constitutional Court.

In 1992, when the future Slovak Constitution was drafted, although not perfect, it included most of the restrictions and rights that a democratic constitution should have. It contained several problematic points, but considering the haste, with which it was drafted, it was still a democratic constitution. Thus Slovakia was entering its independence with a relatively good constitution but was also led by a leadership that had little understanding and patience to follow the complicated mechanism of democratic checks of balances. To Mečiar, anyone who got his or her position thanks to him was thus obliged to act according to the wishes and policies of the Prime Minister. This was a problem first with some of his colleagues in MDS, then the President and the Constitutional Court. At first subservient, but after being in a position of power they decided, for various reason, that they would not go on following orders or doing things that Mečiar's policies entailed. It was at times almost comical to hear the reasons the former allies gave regarding their split with Mečiar. Once in opposition to Mečiar they all claimed that he was a democrat while they were his allies, but just prior to their

departure he changed and they realized that they could not follow him. Although afterwards they defended democracy in Slovakia, their explanation for deserting was a moot point, indeed. Mečiar certainly changed and his policies were gradually more and more authoritarian but his changes were of quantitative but certainly not of qualitative nature. Those who noticed at the beginning of his political career his erratic moods, cunning tactics and incessant lying, were not saying anything else than were those who split from him several years later.

In fact, one way to perceive the Slovak political scene after 1989 is to judge politicians according to their relationship to Mečiar. In the period between 1989-1998 there are several waves of disenchanted politicians who split with Mečiar and joined the opposition. There were politicians like Fedor Gál who distrusted him from the beginning and diagnosed everything the other politicians, journalists and admirers noticed only much later²¹⁵. His diagnosis back in 1991 was accurate and not much different from the description given of Mečiar by his new opponents many years later. Gál described him as a populist who was constantly deceptive, never wavering, or giving in and always improvising and thus very difficult to anticipate his next move or put him to a certain category of political leader. Moreover, according to Gál, Mečiar managed always to find a "proper" enemy that his supporters and general public perceive as someone who is indeed conspiring against the Prime Minister and thus working against Slovakia. Journalists devised a term that he had "Teflon" capability, i.e., whatever scandal he initiated, he managed to put the blame on someone else and often succeeded deceiving the general public.

Milan Kňažko, an actor turned politician who was one of the most active figures in November 1989, was one in a series of abrupt departures, disillusionment from and subsequently expulsion by Mečiar. It came only a few months after the creation of Slovakia, thus at the time when Mečiar felt as powerful and invincible as ever. Kňažko was the first foreign minister of Slovakia and one of the key figures that helped Mečiar to split the Public Against Violence movement in 1991. His resistance to Mečiar was initially very mild, yet even a suggestion by Kňažko before the election of President of Slovakia that the holder of that office should be a neutral figure and not a member of MDS outraged the Prime Minister. What was first a personal difference between the number one and number two in MDS over the choice of President, came to a full eruption after Kňažko urged to create a broader coalition of parties to form a government. He quite logically claimed that, "we face different problems [after independence] than we had before the elections [1992]. Today we cannot survive without a broad support...Thus I personally advocate the creation of a broad coalition that would enjoy the support and confidence of the people".²¹⁶ Pushing Kňažko overboard, surely aware that he would leave with some other deputies,²¹⁷ Mečiar risked minority in the Parliament. Despite having the narrowest of majority, he refused to compromise his supreme position and to share the power with anyone.

²¹⁵ See Jana Klusáková: Nadoraz s Fedorom Gálom [Frankly with Fedor Gal] (1991, Lidové Noviny, Praha) p.34.

²¹⁶ Marian Leško: Mečiar a Mečiarizmus: politik bez škrupúl, politika bez zábran [Mečiar and Mečiarism: a politician with no scruples, policy without restraint] (1996, VMV, Bratislava) p. 95.

²¹⁷ In fact with Kňažko, eight MPs left MDS thus leaving it with 66 deputies, clearly a minority in the Parliament.

The removal of Kňažko was a preview and a cause of clashes with two other major players: the President of Slovakia, Michal Kováč, and the Constitutional Court. Kňažko refused to resign, but in order to remove him, it was not Mečiar, according to the Constitution, but the President who was to recall a member of government. However, in the Constitution there was a wording that the President could, but did not have to, follow the request of the Premier.²¹⁸ The President first requested an opinion from the Constitutional Court but before receiving the report from the Court, the President recalled Kňažko. Mečiar had threatened -- as he did several times in the past -- with governmental crisis, early elections and resignation if his request was not accepted. The President gave in but this was the first and last concession the President granted to the Prime Minister's cunning tactics. Afterwards, the whole period 1993-1998 was dominated by continuous attack of the Prime Minister against the President. Evidently, Mečiar developed strong personal animosity towards President Kováč but, more significantly, it demonstrates the way Mečiar pushed his way through within partially dysfunctional democratic order that allowed him to misuse his political power.

2.The Case of the First Slovak President

Michal Kováč was one of those reformed Communists from the 1960s who were expelled from the Party in 1969, but never rebelled against the regime and, perhaps, never repelled the Communist ideals about the virtues of socialist planning. The Communist regime in Slovakia -- as opposed to the Czech Republic in the 1970s and

²¹⁸ The Constitution in this respect said that the President must accept a "no confidence" vote in the Parliament of any member of government.

1980s where many expelled Communist were degraded to manual work -- supported a great many scientific institutions, isolated from students and their colleagues in the West and even East. People like Kováč were "banished" to these lamentable places in order to feel somehow not fully humiliated, yet comfortable enough not to rebel. A "Faustian trap" of "Normalized" Slovakia. After November 1989 Kováč, as well as Dubček and many other reformed Communists joined the Public Against Violence movement and were promoted as experts to high positions, enjoying full confidence as people who were somehow mistreated by the Communist regime. Kováč became Minister of Industry in the first Mečiar government, and when the latter was deposed for the first time in March 1991 and left the PAV, Kováč duly followed his boss.²¹⁹ After the 1992 elections, Kováč became the Chairman of Czechoslovak Federal Parliament that was actually a temporary institution intended solely to legally dissolve the Federation. Kováč at this post was fulfilling Mečiar's orders, and his performance chairing the Parliament gave an image of a person with no self-confidence and an absence of any charisma. He was also an instrumental figure during the negotiations over the division of Czechoslovakia and he was a strong and open proponent of quick division of the Federation. Thus he had the image of a man who seemed fully dedicated to Mečiar, and thus it was not surprising that

²¹⁹ There is a shattering account given by Fedor Gál and Vladimír Ondruš about the circumstances of the split of the PAV movement in 1991. Gál recalled in 1996: "Michal Kováč and Rudolf Filkus [later the Deputy Chairman of Parliament] visited us at Jiráskova street, and I will be frank. They knew everything, and in spite of that they helped to found the MDS. They knew about the manipulation with classified information, knew about the blackmail of various people, knew about Mečiar's lies -- simply knew everything. All those people who founded the MDS knew what kind of horse they were going to mount and they still did. In I. Antalová *op. cit.*, p.208.

he was nominated as the candidate of the MDS for the first Slovak President²²⁰. Yet in December 1993, nine months after Kováč was elected the President, Mečiar declared: "We lost the elections of President of Slovak Republic".²²¹

It is intriguing how and why a person like Michal Kováč would rebel against someone thanks to whom he was in the position of President. It was certainly not a cunning calculation of an overly ambitious politician who sheepishly awaits his opportunity and then, once in a safe position, completely changes his attitude. During the subsequent five years when Kováč was under continuous attack by Mečiar, not once did he betray the tactics of an opportunist or populist. In fact, he gave the image of a decent and charismatic democratic politician. So why the change and sobering up of Kováč coming only a few months after his election? There is no full satisfactory answer but it surely has to do with the function of the President, an independent position that, in addition, puts its bearer into the limelight under constant public scrutiny. To behave meekly as a subordinate and crony of Mečiar is one thing, to follow orders as the President and look like a fool is another matter. It seems, that the position of independence granted by a democratic regime to a head of state forces even someone without ambition to rebel, to honour the office, and preserve personal integrity. The President withstood the pressure of Vladimír Mečiar, who during the next five years did everything possible, but failed to depose his arch-enemy. Gradually, the President

²²⁰ Although Mečiar nominated Kováč and another candidate for the MDS as candidates, he did little to promote their candidacy within the Parliament where the election of a President required a Constitutional majority of 90 votes, hence 3/5 of the whole number of Members of Parliament. Kováč visited every parliamentary party and presented himself as willing to be the President who is neutral and non-partisan. By this action, he gained the confidence even among some opposition MPs, and eventually 106 MPs gave him their vote. See M. Leško *ibid.* pp.109-110.

gained the confidence of the opposition politicians and democratic press and, through his courage, he encouraged many Slovak democrats not to resign in their struggle against Mečiar. He was instrumental during the deposing of Mečiar in 1994²²² – an important event because it united an otherwise divided opposition, even for a short period, to act together against populists and nationalists. Paradoxically, Kováč, thanks to the fate of his political career, became an important figure in the revival of civil society in Slovakia. It demonstrates that, unless the regime is totalitarian, the role of an individual, whatever the motivation, is instrumental in fighting the regimes that tend to suppress democratic spirit. On the other hand, the effort of the individual, however heroic, could hardly be effective in a society where there exists at least fragmentary civil society.

The episodes with Kňažko and Kováč showed Mečiar that not even the closest allies can be fully trusted. And, in order to confront this matter, he initiated undemocratic and illegal steps that were to guarantee his leadership but that would eventually undermine the *Rechtsstaat* in Slovakia. Let us ponder what we mean by this undermining. Breaching a law is a usual act committed by a civilian or a civil servant in any society. It is up to the judiciary, state power and other democratic checks and balances incorporated in the *Rechtsstaat* that guard -- sometimes less, sometimes more successfully -- against trespassers of the laws. The *Rechtsstaat* is not undermined simply by illegal misuses of political power to whatever ends by the executive power. What defies the *Rechtsstaat* is an overtly unconstitutional act going unpunished, even after the Constitutional court issues a ruling that the act breached the Constitution. Conversely, if a government has a constitutional majority in parliament, it can change the constitution

²²¹ Leško ibid.

and so it can legalize undemocratic acts. In this case the *Rechtsstaat* also stays intact even though undemocratic and illiberal acts are committed. The *Rechtsstaat* is thus not about justice itself, but about the rule of certain legal codex that in itself can be highly undemocratic. The *Rechtsstaat* is breached only after the ruling of the Constitutional Court finds the act against the rule of the constitution. On the contrary, if the governmental power misuses its power in whatever way and yet the constitutional court does not rule in this matter, the *Rechtsstaat* is not undermined, regardless of illegal acts committed. This has been the case in a great many instances when a popularly elected government sees itself as the bearer of absolute power, and refuses its own control by the judiciary. From Nazi Germany in the 1930s, a number of popular regimes in South America, to a number of post-communist societies, the courts were unable or unwilling to control executive power and the result was either totalitarian, authoritarian regimes or illiberal democracies. The case of Slovakia during the Mečiar era was a case where the Constitutional Court decided against a number of governmental actions. First these were respected but gradually were ignored, and hence *Rechtsstaat* ceased to function

What then led Mečiar during this period to evolve from a charismatic leader with a secret police blemish from the past, into a leader that was behind policies of breaking *Rechtsstaat*, giving away state property to his cronies and pulling Slovakia away from the EU and NATO candidate list? It can be argued that it was a combination of both the ignorance and rejection of the democratic rule of conduct mixed with the fear of being betrayed again by his associates. This led Mečiar gradually to devise steps that were intended to assure his absolute control over the MDS Members of Parliament. After

222 Ramet *op.cit.*, p.126.

failing to pass a legal but undemocratic bill restricting the freedom of an MP, he devised various illegal means to contain the MDS deputies. So when Kňažko was asked to resign in March 1993, he claimed that the mandate of an MP was not the private property of an MP. "If he [Kňažko] is honest", Mečiar added, "he should return his mandate to whom it belongs -- the Movement for Democratic Slovakia". In addition to "appealing" to Kňažko's conscience, the MDS submitted a bill that proposed a so-called "restricted mandate" and would mean that an MP that decided to leave a party would be deprived of salary and would be ineligible to vote. In addition, this bill, if passed, would act retroactively so it would still effect Kňažko and his rebellious colleagues. Fortunately, this antidemocratic bill was not passed because the coalition deputies (Slovak National Party and Worker's Party) realized how it would undermine their own position and voted against the bill along with the opposition. In addition, the bill would be unconstitutional because it would conflict with the Constitution that states: "the Members of Parliament personally execute their mandate according to their conscience and conviction, and are not bound by any orders".²²³

Unable to bind the MPs through legal means, Mečiar used illegal ones. In the fall of 1993, he forced his own MDS deputies to sign a proclamation that if they leave the party, they will resign from their position in Parliament. Some of them protested but threatened them that he would resign and bring masses to the streets to protest against any rebellious MP. One MDS MP later talked about then the Chairman of Slovak Parliament, Ivan Gašparovič, who allegedly urged his colleagues not to do "foolish things", claiming that the proclamation had no legal force. "If it would calm the condition

²²³ Constitution of the Slovak Republic (1993, Bratislava) p.18.

in the MDS", he urged them that they should have signed it, and so they did.²²⁴ Regardless whether it had legal binding, it was one of such signed proclamations that caused the breakdown of the rule of law in 1997. In fact, this type of illegal act became more and more typical of the Mečiar government during the 1994-1998 period.

The deterioration of democratic conduct after the emergence of independent Slovakia took place after dramatic events in 1994 when Mečiar returned back to power after his second dismissal as the Premier of Slovakia. Being six months out of power, he returned with a vengeance -- distrustful of his allies and behaving even more undemocratically against his political opponents. It started when another group of MPs left MDS in early 1994 and Mečiar's government received a no confidence vote by the Slovak Parliament in March 1994. He felt hurt and betrayed by his own former allies and the President who openly exposed Mečiar's politics and operation.²²⁵ If before 1994 Mečiar used a variety of cunning tactics, political intrigue, threats, and bribes in order to preserve his power, afterwards he lost almost any restraint, eventually defying the Constitution. I will return in the next chapter to why Mečiar did not outright become an authoritarian ruler like Lukashenko in Belarus or Milošević in Yugoslavia. However, what is important is that after breaching the Constitution several times, the threat of imposing an authoritarian regime was feasible. There has been a debate in Slovakia about what was the turning point or the main cause in Mečiar's readiness to use any illegal means to stay in Power. A prominent Slovak observer, Marian Leško, believes that it

²²⁴ Leško ibid. p.102

²²⁵ President Kováč in his speech to the Slovak Parliament in March 1994 openly asked the MPs to vote against the government. This was a culmination of the conflict between the Premier and President and set the hostile cohabitation between the two for the next four years.

came after a speech Mečiar gave to his supporters in November 1993 in Zlatá Idka, a little town in eastern Slovakia. It was not so much the contents of this non-public speech to his party representatives that blatantly revealed how public funds are used for bribing parties, state institutions and various interest groups, how democratic rules are constantly violated. Rather, Leško believes that what was decisive was the reaction of the general public when the speech was leaked to the press. Democratic opposition was certainly outraged from hearing what they had been suspecting and accusing Mečiar of having done. "The speech was a turning point for a different reason", minds Leško:²²⁶

Although it was fully publicized and frequently quoted and analyzed, in the perception of the public its scandalous subject matter did not damage Mečiar as a politician. Not an insignificant part of the electorate continued to maintain its sympathy for Mečiar. He made his own conclusion from this episode and from this moment on his political action quickly lost any last traces of restraint. The parliamentary elections in 1994 confirmed Mečiar's guess that his voters and supporters would tolerate his flagrant transgression of rules that [in a liberal democracy] are deemed as binding.

There is an important element implicit in Leško's argument that is crucial for understanding development in Slovakia. It is the degree of legitimacy Mečiar received from the electorate for his action. It indicates the condition of Slovakia's political culture as well as the nature of post-communist transformation. It means that the rise of illiberal democracy does not depend on its direct endorsement, but simply on toleration by the majority of anti-democratic action. Passivity, as a heritage of past experience when a citizen did not participate in the public sphere, is extremely dangerous during the building of a political structure. If the structure and tradition of liberal democracy had been set, if the checks and balances of the rule of law had been in place in Slovakia, a populist of Mečiar's ilk would not have had the chance to venture into the things he did without

²²⁶ Leško *ibid.* p.208

retribution. It was only later on that majority of Slovaks were not only outraged, but were willing to do something for the restoration of democratic rule. As was noted in Table 1 (Chapter I), if the leadership and the electorate condone anti-democratic action, the result might be civil strife or even civil war. Why it did not come to that, though all the ingredients were in place, will be analyzed in the next chapter.

3. The Third Mečiar Government 1994-1998

The result of the September 1994 parliamentary elections, despite a skillful and expensive electoral campaign by the MDS, did not result with its absolute majority (Appendix 1). The coalition, with the Slovak National Party and newly formed Association of Workers in Slovakia, came only slowly and reluctantly, but once in place it acted swiftly²²⁷. Led by Mečiar, it did everything contrary to the democratic spirit that a parliamentary majority allows, and increasingly used illegal and unconstitutional means. The aim was not only to marginalize the opposition, control his allies, restrict press and freedom of information and total freedom to distribute state property, but primarily revenge against those who deserted Mečiar -- the President and the former MPs who formed a new party, Democratic Union. In a peculiar way, Mečiar was much more aggressive against the latter two than against his political opposition. He perceived their legitimate option and decision to desert him or be neutral as a most personal betrayal.

During the inaugural parliamentary session starting on November 3, Parliament was in continuous session for 23 hours. First the coalition squeezed out any opposition deputy from all-important Parliamentary Committees -- except the one dealing with

environmental issues where the MPs nominated by the opposition were put. All members were replaced in the Councils overseeing state Radio and Television, the Council overseeing the operation of Slovak Intelligence Agency (SIS) and the National Property Fund -- the latter the institution overseeing privatization of state property.²²⁸ The Attorney General and the head of the State Auditing Committee were also dismissed. In addition, the opposition did not receive any positions in the administration of the Parliament -- a common practice would be to have the Chairman or one of the deputies from the opposition. In addition, two proceedings were initiated in order to prosecute the President of Slovakia and the Democratic Union (DU), the party that split from the MDS.

The harassment of, and attempt to oust from politics, Mečiar's former allies, was a bizarre and obsessive antidemocratic exercise using all possible means including police that eventually became the main reason for pushing Slovakia off the list of countries applying for membership of NATO and the EU. The first initiative that eventually failed was to dismiss the DU deputies from Parliament in order to divide proportionally their seats. It was an attempt to achieve a constitutional majority and thus provide absolute control of the state by executive power.²²⁹ This would in turn allow the dismissal of the President, alter the Constitution and hence legalize any antidemocratic procedure voted

²²⁷ See Samuel Abraham: "Early Election in Slovakia: A State of Deadlock" in *Government and Opposition* 30:1 (Winter 1995), pp. 86-100.

²²⁸ see S. Szomolányi: Kľukatá cesta Slovenska k demokracii [Twisted road of Slovakia towards Democracy] (1999, STIMUL, Bratislava) pp. 57-58

²²⁹ Although the Slovak Constitution does not have a provision about the redistribution of votes in Parliament, these were the possibilities if the coalition had succeeded with their plan. The Coalition possessed 83 votes in the 150-member parliament. The DU had 15 members, and if their votes had been redistributed among the remaining parties in Parliament, the coalition would have received 8 votes out of 15, thus having together 91 votes -- constitutional majority.

for by the coalition MPs in the Parliament. In other words, the spirit of democracy would be defied, but the *Rechtsstaat* preserved – another characterization or definition of illiberal democracy. The DU was accused that it had not received enough signatures before it was registered as a party. It was not enough that the Electoral Committee issued a statement that the amount of signatures was sufficient. When the Constitutional Court endorsed the same notion, Mečiar challenged the impartiality of the Constitutional Court claiming that it was yet "another sick element on the scene....".²³⁰ In his attempt to oust the DU members, Mečiar used means he had no mandate for. Police force was used to visit every person on the list asking him or her whether they had "really" signed the petition for the creation of the Democratic Union. This was clearly an intimidation campaign both against the DU and the 12,000 citizens signing the petition. It ended in a fiasco, as did several other similar actions when Mečiar's coalition tried to use the police to attain its political will. The police, a body that is under the control of the executive power, should be at the same time impartial and investigate any illegal acts. It was in no way acting against the government during this period but, at the same time, it refused to be an accomplice to illegal action, which the government was trying to use it for. There was a professional *esprit de corps* among the police officers that was hard to break by the government, the Attorney General and the secret police – all the subservient means Mečiar used for achieving his goals.²³¹

Another object of Mečiar's malice was the President, Michal Kováč, and the

²³⁰ See Leško *ibid.* pp. 130-136.

²³¹ Police after four months of investigation did not even provide the list of verified signatures to the Minister of Interior, who in turn called them: "Police officers are a bunch of morons". Leško, *ibid.*, p.136.

means used in order to remove him from office ranged from political intimidation to criminal acts. He initiated the creation of a committee to investigate whether the President had or had not breached his constitutional rights with the speech to the Parliament that had eventually led to the dismissal of the Second Mečiar government in March 1994. It was an utterly absurd accusation and what followed were several measures to strip the President of as many functions as the majority in Parliament could afford, including drastically decreasing the budget of the Presidential office. Thus far, these were, however, rather innocent intimidation methods in order to expel the President from office. The culmination of this series of bullying tactics was the kidnapping of the President's son in August 1995. It was a brutal act in order to psychologically destroy Kováč and in this way force him to resign. The logic behind the kidnapping was that Kováč Jr. was sought by Interpol in an investigation in Germany over embezzlement charges in which he supposedly been involved in 1991. So the Slovak Intelligence Agency (SIS) masterminded a plan to take Kováč Jr. by force to Austria. They hoped that Austria would extradite him to Germany and cause further embarrassment to Kováč Sr. The whole kidnapping was an embarrassment for the government. The Austrians not only did not send Kováč Jr. to Germany, but the Austrian Regional Court issued a statement that the kidnapping had been done with the awareness of the state organs of the Slovak Republic. At home, police investigators, acting independently and impartially, immediately subpoenaed a number of SIS officers. The Attorney General had to replace the investigation team three times before finding a police investigator who would not probe into SIS involvement and put the whole case *ad acta*.²³² The kidnapping was

²³² See Ľuba Lesná: Únos prezidentovho syna [Kidnapping of President's son] (1998, GMT,

clearly a criminal act organized by the secret police.²³³ Mečiar and his cronies relentlessly argued that Kováč Jr. was a criminal, suggesting that the whole case was a work of the Mafia or even planned by Kováč Jr. himself! This act was the shock for the whole society, historically unused to such brutal criminal conduct by state authorities. The free press extensively reported on the case, exposing the absurd cover-up action by the government and its popularity dropped sharply. The police investigators dismissed from the case talked openly about their frustration and cover-ups by the secret police. This, however, did not discourage the government from initiating several other steps that put Slovakia in a position of unstable democracy.

The government coalition, feeling all powerful and vindictive using not only undemocratic but increasingly unconstitutional and illegal acts, had to initiate further and further steps to silence and marginalize its growing number of critics. Everyone working in the state administration, from high-ranking civil servants to library employees, were screened and replaced if undesirable by local government coalition representatives. Civil servants on every level were asked to join the MDS if willing to remain in their position. These policies attracted into the coalition ranks opportunists of all sorts, and that was one reason why the general mood towards the government worsened. The popularity of the coalition was continuously lower than of the opposition.²³⁴ The international isolation of Slovakia began to increase, and the government was very apprehensive to listen to and

Bratislava).

²³³ For the legal aspects of the whole case see Jozef Prusák: "Právo na vlasť v Ústave Slovenskej republiky" [The right on a homeland in the Constitution of Slovak Republic], *Právny Obzor*, 4-79 (1996) pp. 305-311.

²³⁴ See Zora Bútorová: "Verejná mienka"[Public Opinion] *Slovensko 1997* (1998, Institute of Public Affairs, Bratislava) p. 220 Table 14.

face criticism. Perhaps the greatest immediate damage to the international position of Slovakia was caused by three new Laws of the Criminal Code in which the aim was to silence domestic opposition and the press, and prevent public meetings that were more and more frequently being organized in various cities in Slovakia. It stated, among other things -- very much reminiscent of the old Communist Criminal Code -- that punished will be everyone who "organises public meetings of citizens *with the intention* to disintegrate the constitutional order, territorial integrity, the defense of the state or undermine its independence." And in order to prevent criticism of the government abroad, the Law punished everyone who, "with bad intent spread untruthful news that harms the interest of the state". Even the Council of Slovak Catholic Bishops was alarmed by the resemblance of these laws to the ones from the Communist era that effected many believers. How to prove a bad intent, "by forceful means?", the Bishops demanded to know. One US diplomat on this occasion stated that if Slovakia wished to be dropped from the first wave of those admitted to the EU, then the new laws were the best way to achieve it.²³⁵ Indeed, thanks to the government coalition politics, by the end of 1996 Slovakia was left out from the group of neighbouring countries that were applying to NATO and the EU.

It seemed that the international isolation of Slovakia did not worry the coalition. In a way, being unrestrained by outside constraints made it easier to silence the opposition and solidify its power and remain unchecked in its embezzlement of state property. With Slovakia off the list of candidate countries for the EU and NATO, it would attract less attention from western governments and media. In this respect,

²³⁵ Leško op.cit. p.162.

whether intentionally or not, Mečiar's government was heading towards becoming an authoritarian regime. According to one eminent observer, by 1997 all the ingredients for an eruption similar to Yugoslavia were present.²³⁶ Certainly, Mečiar's relationship with and control of government members and the coalition parliamentarians was anything but concomitant with liberal democracy. Even the slightest difference in view, silence or abstention from vote when Mečiar demanded a clear position was considered and treated as treason, and the option was intimidation and/or expulsion. On the other hand, loyalty towards Mečiar was generously rewarded and even rank and file members of the coalition were corrupted by generous hand outs and lucrative positions. In order to finance the whole operation, more and more state property was to be privatized, and in order to achieve this the privatization had to be done outside of public scrutiny and secretly. Hence, the state owned agency, the National Property Funds, was transformed into an NGO, thus without accountability to Parliament. State property worth billions of crowns was distributed without public scrutiny for a fraction of its real value among the coalition members, their families and cronies. These were legal but illegitimate acts that Mečiar's regime had imposed on a society that, historically, had been discontent but not rebellious. Slovakia, in its own way and close to its tradition, started during the course of the third Mečiar government to be the latter, on a scale unprecedented in its history.

At the beginning of 1997 the general public was alarmed by developments in the country, and protests and petitions became more and more common. The civil society was gaining force, although only under pressure. The mood in society by the second half

²³⁶ Jan Urban, a prominent Czech dissident, journalist and after 1989 politician who spent two years in war-torn Sarajevo in 1995-1997. He stated in a public discussion in Bratislava in October

of 1997 was overwhelmingly against Mečiar.²³⁷ The press, although under attack, was more and more defiant openly criticizing and exposing the shadowy transfers of property and government excesses. The more unpopular the government became the more arrogantly it behaved towards its critics. Progressively, its behaviour was that of a criminal group taking over power in a country and adjusting the laws according to its own needs. John Gray's observation on Russia's political compact and wild privatization in 1995 fits Slovakia's condition of 1997. He writes that, "nomenclaturist expropriation and rent-seeking and...the economic system it has yielded [was] a sort of anarcho-capitalism of competing mafias".²³⁸ Indeed, that the government coalition did not breach laws as often as one would expect was because it did not have to. It would just pass another undemocratic law that would grant legality to an act that would be deemed illegal, illegitimate even criminal in a liberal democratic country. If, at this point, Mečiar's regime had turned into an autocratic regime, it would have surprised only very few. He had surrounded himself with a fanatical and arrogant band that was ready to impose and defend any regime. Their vested interest in the continuation of Mečiar's regime was pre-eminent -- they benefited from their position and they were also responsible for the political condition of Slovakia.

1997 that after comparing conditions in Yugoslavia and Slovakia, all the ingredients that had led to the civil war and authoritarian regime in Yugoslavia were present in Mečiar's Slovakia.

²³⁷ See the table describing opinions of Slovak citizens in October 1997 in Bútorová *ibid.*, p.199.

3. The Gaulieder Case

In the next chapter we will ponder over why Mečiar's regime did not become openly authoritarian. In this chapter we still have to deal with the question of what drove Mečiar to more and more radical policies, culminating with breaching the foremost attribute of liberal democracy -- the *Rechtsstaat*. Instead of demonizing Mečiar, as was often the case with his opponents, his policies can be explained within the contingency of post-communist transformation where the rule of law is set by those that are supposed to obey it. Therefore it is much easier for leaders of executive power in a post-communist society to repeal the rule of law than in a stable liberal society, where the rules are set and checks and balances are in place. Those who are supposed to check their actions are either in a subservient position towards those that break the *Rechtsstaat*, or their decision is not enforced. The primary cause of the defiance of the rule of law in 1997 can be traced to an episode before the 1994 general election. Before the nomination of MDS MPs for the September election, Mečiar again forced the candidates to sign -- authorized by public notary -- a blank sheet of paper, for a similar purpose as before. If they decide to leave MDS and not resign from the Parliament, the blank sheet would be filled with whatever text deemed necessary. This illegal act lead eventually to the most important case, that of František Gaulieder, of undermining the *Rechtsstaat* in Slovakia and as a result the full imposition of illiberal democracy. The expulsion from Parliament of MDS MP Gaulieder in the fall of 1996 was the turning point that initiated the demise of the *Rechtsstaat* in Slovakia.

238 John Gray: "The Post-communist Societies in Transition" in Enlightenment's Wake (1995, Routledge, London; p. 57).

The reason for this gradual imposition of illiberal democracy has to do with Mečiar's obsessive will to stay in power, combined with a paranoid fear of being betrayed by his close associates. Popularity among the population was not enough for Mečiar to stay in power in 1991 and 1994. The two removals of Mečiar from the position of Premier of Slovakia was due to the desertion of his own allies to the opposition. This mechanism that can restrain a popular but illiberal leader, is one of the defense valves that protect democracy against autocrats striving to attain absolute power. With this traumatic experience, he was determined not to be betrayed by his deputies again after his party won the election in September 1994 for the third time. After creating a fragile coalition in November 1994, he imposed a tight control of discipline within the new coalition, eventually even at the price of obstructing the Slovak Constitution. Many of the MPs were fanatical acolytes of Mečiar, and would not leave him whatever his policies. Others were more opportunists than fanatics, and the way to keep them loyal was to offer them a share of state property or well paid positions on the boards of lucrative companies. There was one exception.

František Gaulieder, a Member of Parliament for MDS and initially a loyal supporter of Mečiar, decided in 1996 to leave his master. First, in November 1994 as a trusted MP, Gaulieder was given a position in the council overseeing the operation of the Slovak Intelligence Agency. And for those two years before he decided to leave Mečiar there was no indication that he might leave MDS. It is not clear what exactly the motivation was, what had been the last drop that prompted him to leave the MDS ranks. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Gaulieder wished to create or join another political party. And certainly he could expect a hostile reaction by Mečiar and the MDS. In fact,

it was more hostile than ever. The coalition was rather unpopular at that moment and Gaulieder's desertion, if unchecked, might have caused a flood of, sometimes grumbling, deputies that would topple the Mečiar government yet again. The fact remains that the expulsion from Parliament of Gaulieder was the turning point in undermining the rule of law during Mečiar's 1994-98 rule.

According to the Slovak Constitution, a Parliamentarian loses the mandate if he or she dies, commits an act of high treason or requests resignation. In Gaulieder's case, the first two were not an option, under certain conditions and with some manipulation, the last one was feasible. The blank sheet of paper that Gaulieder, as every MDS deputy, signed in order to be put on the candidates' list before the 1994 election, was duly typed out with a 1996 date and a request for resignation. It was then "received" by the Chairman of Parliament. Gaulieder, anticipating this letter, had already sent a letter to the Chairman declaring that he did not plan to leave his post in Parliament, and stated that any letter that the Chairman might receive afterwards saying otherwise, would not be his and should be ignored. At the same time, Gaulieder was unwilling to admit publicly that as an MP he had signed a blank sheet of paper and that he was himself co-responsible for this illegal act.²³⁹ The Chairman, a deputy of the MDS, gave both letters to the appropriate parliamentary committee to decide upon this issue. The committee, composed entirely of coalition government deputies, decided of course that the second letter was authentic and thus Parliament could fulfill Gaulieder's "wish" and thus released

²³⁹ Several authors write about the circumstances of Gaulieder expulsion. See Katarína Závacká: "The Development of Constitutionalism in Slovakia" in S. Szomolányi and John A. Gould: Slovakia: Problems of Democratic Consolidation (1997, Slovak Political Science Association, Bratislava) p.162. See also S. Abrahám: "Pripad Gaulieder: koniec právneho štátu na

him from his duties.²⁴⁰ Protests by the opposition, the President, the media, diplomats and international institutions fell on deaf ears. Gaulieder was expelled from Parliament, a new loyal MP was sworn in, and any MDS deputy could see the fate of a non-conformist. The internal crisis was terminated.²⁴¹

Up to this point, the Gaulieder case was one in a series of displays of arrogant behaviour and undemocratic conduct, what Tocqueville would call a "tyranny of majority". The rules of democratic conduct were broken, but there was no one to investigate the case considering the police and the Attorney General were not acting impartially and were under the control of the "elected majority". There was one institution that was independent from government intrusion, and that was the Constitutional Court. This "sick element of the scene" as Mečiar once called it was asked by opposition deputies to examine the Gaulieder case, and the Court decided that the expulsion was against the Constitution. Up to that point all the Constitutional Court's decisions had been upheld by the government and thus the *Rechtsstaat* had still been holding. This was not the case after this decision of the protector of the Constitution. The reason the government must have defied the ruling, was a sort of Catch 22 involved in this case. If Gaulieder were readmitted to Parliament, the MDS would be held responsible for the forged letter because an investigation of the notary who verified the

Slovensku?" [Gaulieder case: the end of the rule of law in Slovakia?"] In *SME*, December 12, 1996.

²⁴⁰ The Committee deliberation was not unanimous. In fact, its chairman, an MP from the Workers Party thus an MDS coalition partner, stated that the second letter requesting resignation was a forgery. Yet, the majority of the Council, mostly MDS members, ignored him.

²⁴¹ Grigorij Mesežnikov and Michal Ivantyšin, eds.: *Slovensko 1998-1999: Súhrn správa o stave spoločnosti* [Slovakia 1998-1999: A comprehensive report on the state of society] (1999, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava) p.20.

signatures in 1994 would confirm the existence of signed blank sheet of paper. Upholding the decision to keep Gaulieder out of Parliament, on the other hand, was a flagrant defiance of the Constitution that ended the *Rechtsstaat*. With this precedent, it was the executive power and the majority in Parliament that decided to act outside the law. Afterwards, the coalition repelled several other Constitutional Court decisions and gradually became increasingly authoritarian. Yet it did not dare to become fully authoritarian by removing the Constitutional and Supreme Courts or refusing to hold free elections. Rather, the government concentrated on winning the next elections and was willing to defy law, use any legal obstruction, state media and unlimited state funds in order to undermine the opposition. After defying the *Rechtsstaat*, one would assume that had they only remained in power after the next elections, they would not be held responsible. Or so they might have thought.²⁴²

What is incomprehensible is that although the Gaulieder case caused internal and international uproar, it was taken by the opposition and the press solely as yet another case of Mečiar's excesses. The implications of breaching the *Rechtsstaat* somehow escaped them or were not distinguished from other illegal acts of the Mečiar government coalition.²⁴³ It was this lack of awareness of the foundation and rules on which liberal

²⁴² As will be made clear, despite the MDS losing the election in 1998, the succeeding government did not hold Mečiar and his allies responsible for all the illegal action the latter had committed. This goes beyond the scope of this work and we will touch on this issue in the conclusion.

²⁴³ The author of these lines explained the ramifications of the Gaulieder case as a precedent case. Yet, apart from one journalist, it remained unanswered even after the election when the democratic opposition won. The case was closed in March 2000 by paying hefty compensation to Mr. Gaulieder who never publicly acknowledged that he signed the blank document before the 1994 election. See S. Abrahám: "Prípád Gaulieder a právne vedomie na Slovensku" [Gaulieder case and the state of legal awareness in Slovakia] in daily *SME* March 7, 2000.

democracy stands, even by democratic politicians, that set their political conduct after winning the 1998 elections. Nevertheless, the Gaulieder case set the stage, from the 1997 Constitutional Court ruling, for full manifestation of illiberal democracy in Slovakia and it was up to the society itself whether it was to tolerate these policies.

5. A Shift in Political Culture

Political culture depends on a society's historical background, the prevalent political condition, and the nature of information the citizens receive. Its condition is manifested by the public's more or less accurate perception of political events taking place in society. The degree of accuracy, and to what extent various stereotypes and misperceptions prevail, varies from society to society. The post-communist societies, due to the legacy of Communist regimes, are characterized by a highly distorted political culture and the degree of distortion depends on the duration and nature of a Communist regime and whether a democratic regime existed prior to the Communist era.

During the Communist era, there was a discussion in the West as to whether political culture reflected the official views that Communist regimes tried to imprint on the population. The experts could not decide whether the population would or should act against the regime if its political culture differed from the regime's official political culture. It is all history now and we know that some individuals rebelled against the regime but the vast majority did not. Certainly, the Communist regimes imprinted something onto the minds of the citizens, certainly not, though, what it wished the citizen believed. This skewed political culture put the turbulence of post-communist transformation into high gear, exacerbated by an unrealistic view of what the end of the

Communist regime might bring. In addition, whereas the Communist structure collapsed within a few days, political culture altered only slightly after the fall of Communist regime in 1989.²⁴⁴ Thus, we have in a different society, a different political culture and hence different development during the post-communist transformation. Disparity between Slovak and Czech political culture was one important reason for different development in these two societies that, in turn, had great influence on the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993 as was argued in Chapter IV.

The distortion of political culture of Slovak society was particularly acute in the perception of its pre-communist past. The reason for false and stereotypical views of the past were thanks to the communist era's absence of reliable historical texts and a lack of any public discussion about Slovakia's recent, distant and most distant past.²⁴⁵ According to one sociological study, the views among Slovak citizens were mostly preserved in oral form within family stories and memories -- thus extremely distorted and unreliable.²⁴⁶ Being a nation in central Europe, where regimes, countries, religions and ideologies have changed several times in the 20th century, Slovakia has been a perfect place for the cultivation of stereotypes and misconceptions about its own history and present status. After 1989, the populists and nationalists found in Slovakia a perfect

²⁴⁴ See Chapter I (Section 2) and Chapter II (Section 3).

²⁴⁵ See an interesting debate among prominent Slovak historians in *Kritika & Kontext* (2-3/97). They lament over a lack of reliable history textbooks either for primary schools or university students. They also had to face a flood of literature written by nationalistically oriented defenders of war-time Fascist Slovak State 1939-1945 whose sole purpose has been to legitimize a nationalist interpretation of Slovak history. The latter literature has been published in Slovakia since 1989 but it was endorsed and supported since 1993 especially by the Slovak Nationalist Party in Mečiar's government.

²⁴⁶ see Iveta Radičová ed.: *Malé dejiny Česko-Slovenské, I.-VI.* [Little Czech and Slovak histories, vol. I-VI.] (1994, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Bratislava).

ground due to the melange of views and stereotypes deeply held and easily expanded into hatred and ethnic or racial tensions.

Political culture does not change overnight, the views of people change slowly and the changes can be either for the better or the worse. It can be argued that all those civil wars in the former Communist domain meant, above all, a further deterioration in political culture. The hatred of the other originated in little or misconceived knowledge of those either ethnically or racially different, or those who held different views. What brought young Serbs and Croats to kill each other? Certainly not a careful study of the history of World War Two and their ancestors involvement in it. In an ignorant mind, the hatred that existed a generation ago switched like a spark to the present. In a mind that is educated, reflective and tolerant, there is a desire to know about past atrocities or good things in order to either avoid or cultivate the things from the past. The emergence of Slovak nationalists who hated Czechs, Hungarians, Roma and Jews came unexpectedly after 1989. And it was not just nationalists who fostered variable degree of hatred, disdain or distance for those who did not share their views, colour of skin or nationality. The Slovak nationalists particularly hated those Slovaks who were tolerant and friendly with other ethnic groups considering them as traitors of things Slovak. The dividing line between nationalists and non-nationalists was also a dividing line between those in Slovakia who fostered or tolerated illiberal democracy or were proponents of liberal democratic values and political system.

The political culture in Slovakia as it entered its independence in 1993 was a mixture of these stereotypes, hatreds and clashes of views about what Slovakia should represent, and where it should be heading. The rise of illiberal democracy was one way

to impose one specific view of Slovakia onto the mind of every Slovak. Yet, at the same time, a component of Slovak political culture – along with the nationalist views and stereotypes – has been a democratic and liberal tradition. It is a heritage of mainly democratic Czechoslovakia (1918-1939) but also of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of which the territory of present-day Slovakia was a part until 1918. Especially important for this tradition was the experience in the period between the two world wars when Czechoslovakia, under its first President, T.G. Masaryk, was considered an island of democracy in central Europe. It stood for, and admired, democracy and freedom, which had been denied during the communist era. The communists also tried hard to eradicate the Jewish-Christian ethical and moral codex – the heritage of Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian Empire. The system of these values that was a part of Slovak history was, no doubt, distorted during the communist era, yet it established a bedrock on which a modest democratic tradition surfaced after 1989. A tradition that created a base that eventually brought about a strong civil society before 1998, when Mečiar's regime was dragging Slovakia into a non-democratic realm.

Thus the democratic political culture somehow survived during the Communist era and re-entered, somehow chequered and misconstrued, after the fall of the Communist regime. Before 1989, it did not survive in the public sphere where first fascist and then communist regimes tried to obliterate anything but their own distorted creeds. It survived rather as an oral tradition, within families, in personal relationships and in the day-to-day interaction of individuals. Certainly not an ideal way to carry on a democratic tradition, but the only way yielded by a porous totalitarian regime that managed to command the behaviour and thwart the language of its subjects, but failed to

order the thinking of the majority of the population. The result was that a group of democratically-minded individuals were surrounded by a majority with a distorted system of values where, very often, the same individuals that were partially influenced by Slovak democratic tradition, were susceptible and often persuaded by communist ideology. Not surprisingly, the same latter individuals fell victim after 1989 to the arguments and conviction of another mass ideology – nationalism.

Slovakia after November 1989 thus combined a sort of schizophrenic political culture that took almost a decade to alter. A clash of civilizations, Samuel Huntington might say, but this clash often ran through the head of one and the same person; between family members, where some were overwhelmed by Mečiar and nationalistic rhetoric, and some were utterly repelled. Slovak society became sharply divided, not only according to the left-right political spectrum, but also according to their outlook that defined different civilizational positions. Democratic and non-democratic, liberal and illiberal views blended, and the future of Slovakia was at stake in the late 1990s. As Slovakia became increasingly isolated and marginalized, gradually more and more people, especially young, were equating Mečiar populism and nationalism with a past they did not want to be part of any more. There were many sobering up experiences from "Mečiarism", although no one who had first been a nationalist and an admirer of Mečiar, gave a sincere account of the "conversion". The same as there was no apology after 1989 by any prominent communist about the crimes of communist regimes, there was no repentance by any former Mečiar supporters who became first disenchanted and then an opponent of the populist and nationalistic policies of the Mečiar government. A sign that political culture in Slovakia has not been mature and democratic enough to produce a

sincere reflection similar to one we know from the book "The God that Failed". Still, the positive shift in Slovak political culture was significant and the same, as Mečiar was the natural outcome of that culture after 1989, the democratic political culture that became pre-eminent after 1997 was the result of historical and contingent circumstances of modern Slovakia.²⁴⁷

Review

This chapter followed a genesis of two processes, one the rise of illiberal democracy and then its gradual defiance. The energy that rested and erupted in Slovakia in the late 1990s signaled a shift in overall political culture. A political culture that used to be characterized by passivity, was backward looking and adoptive of whatever and whoever was in power, started to change sometime after Slovakia became independent in 1993. There is no point in trying to pinpoint a specific year, or one particular episode that altered the view of the majority to become more forward looking, democratic and tolerant. However, by 1997 it was in place. It was certainly helped by the arrogant policies of Mečiar's government, by the feeling of increased isolation and estrangement of Slovakia from its neighbours. But it was also a maturation process in a society that had a great array of choices to choose from and, at the end, the majority chose what represents Western values and democratic orientation. If Slovakia experienced political revolution that caught her surprised and unprepared in 1989, as we described in chapter III, then in 1997-1998 we can notice a change, a revolution of political culture. Thus, 1998 is as important in many ways, if not more so, than 1989. Or, in fact, as any date in Slovakia's modern history because this "revolution of spirit" was indigenous, originating inside a society that could choose otherwise....

²⁴⁷ A prominent Slovak political sociologist, Soňa Szomolányi, argues that the positive development in Slovakia was due to, what she calls, "the treatment by Mečiar". It sees Mečiar as something anomalous and foreign to Slovak political culture and at the same time it perceives the majority of citizens as unable to improve, progress on their own. A negative experience is the only way to extract a positive result. I disagree with this strictly contingent view of the evolution of political culture where it is perceived that strictly the political elite is responsible for advance or regress of the evolution of political culture. See S. Szomolányi *op.cit.*, pp. 81,85,102.

Chapter VI

1998 Election and the Birth of the Citizen

Overview

In this concluding chapter it will be argued that the fall of illiberal democracy after the September 1998 elections was not an incidental event. It was the result of a shift in the overall political culture in a society that had overwhelmingly rejected populist and nationalist policies and rhetoric; the democratic heritage that, although much damaged and distorted, survived somehow in the historical memory and allowed for the emergence of a civil society. The popularity of the populist leaders that had been so dominant since a few months after November 1989 fell dramatically because the overall conditions in society, and thus political culture too, had altered. The legitimacy factor that was presented in Table I (Chapter I) as an independent variable underwent a significant qualitative shift. After nine years of a difficult and turbulent post-communist transformation period, epitomized by successive populist and nationalist governments and the break-up of Czechoslovakia, the outcome of the September 1998 elections resulted in the majority of the population and the new government both being genuinely for democratic reforms. Slovakia again aspired to become a serious NATO and EU candidate. What is even more significant is that the shift was generated from within society assisted by free private media, the non-governmental organizations and international pressure and happened, as will be explained, only partially due to the activities of the opposition politicians.

Introduction

There is no singular explanation to account for the momentous change in a society that was for so long considered to be dangerously swayed by a nationalist and populist elite. The defeat of illiberal democracy in 1998 was due to the combined effect of long

and short-term conditions within Slovak society as interpreted in the previous chapters. The important mobilization effect stimulating the civil society and altering dominant political culture in Slovakia, came from the free printed and electronic media and, just prior to the elections, the non-governmental organizations, and civic associations. Other factors were: general dissatisfaction with the gradual international isolation of Slovakia, and the fear of being left out of transatlantic Western institutions. Another unexpected psychological factor was that in independent Slovakia after 1993, the citizens – mainly those who had initially been against the split of Czechoslovakia – became more involved in the public affairs.

In this chapter, first the role of free media will be assessed in the process of change, and the gradual shift in Slovak political culture that took place during this period. This was a development of immense importance for understanding the dynamics of illiberal democracy. Second, considering illegal acts, breaching the Constitution and thus the *Rechtsstaat*, we will ponder over a poignant question which prevented Mečiar from going one step further and establishing an authoritarian regime. Third, we will assess the role of the political opposition which was intimidated, marginalized and squeezed out of state media by the populist-nationalist government coalition. Conditions were difficult for the opposition in 1998, the result of which was that prior to the 1998 elections it did not play a very active role in the whole revival of civil society. Next, a special focus will be the assessment of minorities in Slovakia's politics where substantial Hungarian and Roma minorities has become an important aspect of previous and contemporary politics in Slovakia. Finally, we will assess the impact on the electorate of the evident failure of Mečiar's government to sustain Slovakia in the first group of NATO and EU candidate

countries. International pressure exerted on Mečiar's government played a significant role in bringing about the overall mood change in society.

1. The Role of Free Media and NGOs

There are two possible explanations why a society rejects illiberal democracy: one is a matter of efficacy; another, of principles. The first scenario is that a corrupt and arrogant leadership, due to its exercise of power, is perceived as being too politically and economically overtaxing and damaging to the well being of society. The operational radius of populists and nationalists – to stir emotions, arouse nationalistic pride, search for and mob an internal enemy and to condition the society as being under constant threat -- becomes less potent in comparison to the economic hardship and international marginalization of such a society. Thus the society, pragmatically calculating the pros and cons of such a political compact, rejects illiberal democracy as an inefficient political entity. This aspect certainly played a role and there were some Slovaks who had previously supported Mečiar but subsequently started to see him simply as a liability to their own welfare. However, there is an argument contrary to such a purely pragmatic and instrumental scenario explaining why the vast majority of Slovaks rejected Mečiar in September 1998. Surprisingly, to many observers, the Slovak economy after 1993 did not deteriorate as expected. On the contrary, the economic performance even improved in the 1995-1996 period, and it was not until 1998 that it plummeted -- even then it remained within reasonable limits. The reason for this was a combination of the following factors: very tight monetary policies by the Slovak Central Bank, heavy state borrowing, and a relatively good base inherited from the "Czechoslovak era".

The second reason for a society rejecting a populist regime is that it refuses to tolerate its government excesses and is no longer indifferent to the fate of its country and actively participates in the regime's downfall. It seems that this was the predominant case of Slovakia a few years after its independence. A country that was no longer either a part of larger ideological bloc, as was the case during the Communist era, nor a political unit, as being part of Czechoslovakia, became much more responsible for its own destiny. The population was free to support or reject, without being prompted by outside pressure, liberal democracy. It could continue, as it did for several years after 1993, tolerate an illiberal democracy or even an authoritarian regime or it could fight to become a liberal democratic society. Perhaps for the first time in modern history, Slovak citizens realized that it was only they themselves who would decide whether their country was to be led by narrow-minded politicians or those who help Slovakia to be a freer, prosperous society striving to become a genuine civil society. It could be that they became aware that not forces from outside, but they themselves were to decide the fate of the future Slovakia. This was certainly the most surprising, if indirect, development derived from the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Indirect, because the main protagonists who fought against illiberal democracy were those who also had fought against Mečiar even before 1993 and who had generally been against the split of Czechoslovakia.

What was the catalyst that mobilized public opinion and caused a strong enough outrage among the majority of the population which led in 1998 to an extraordinary mobilization of civil society being witnessed? Was it the case of the kidnapping of the President's son and the cover up of its investigation that was very reminiscent of the performance of some South American Junta regime? Or was it the Mečiar government's

repudiation in 1997 of a referendum on the direct election of the President? The public must have been outraged that, after the opposition collected half a million signatures supporting the referendum, the Minister of Interior simply terminated the referendum on technical reasons and refused to comply with the subsequent Constitutional Court decision that his action had been unconstitutional. Or was the main reason the massive privatization of state property for a fraction of the real price among the government coalition members and their cronies? It is difficult to pinpoint a particular case or occasion that represented a watershed in the public perception of the true nature of Mečiar's government. One can assume that it was rather a synergic effect caused by several factors.

There is one aspect in the mobilization of civil society, hence rejecting illiberal democracy, and that the activities of free and private media in Slovakia. The relentless disclosure of the excesses and abuses of power in the independent media seems equally important, if not more so than the scandalous behaviour of the government itself. Although under pressure, some more, some media less preserved their freedom from the government's manipulation and control. It is safe to assess that without the brave work of the free media, the civil society in Slovakia would have hardly emerged.

It must be said at the same time, that despite the immense importance of the free media, it would have been to no avail if society itself had not been receptive enough and ready to stand up against the populist regime. The free media can induce and compel the civil society, but it cannot create it. Free media has little chance of succeeding in a society where the appeal of populism demagoguery and sirens of nationalism is stronger than the voice of reason and common sense. There has been some free media in the

former Yugoslavia and Russia, and yet their appeals fell on deaf ears. There must be mutual reciprocity and support between the free media and the majority political culture.

The profile of two media in Slovakia, the newspaper *SME* and the television station Markíza, will demonstrate such mutual interdependence. Both were first supportive of Mečiar and his policies, but gradually distanced themselves and became the main target of government attacks against free media. As a result of this harassment, Slovakia was designated by Freedom House, a prominent international agency monitoring freedom of the media around the globe, as being a country with "partially free media".²⁴⁸ The state-run TV and Radio, after in 1994 being thoroughly purged of anyone who was not actively pro-government, became a tool of political indoctrination. They did not provide objective information about government operations. On the contrary, they spread sheer propaganda in order to discredit political opposition, the President and the free media.²⁴⁹

The most outspoken and also most harassed media in Slovakia was *SME* newspaper. It was founded after the Mečiar government tried to change the editors of the *SME* predecessor *Smena* during the early months of 1993 due to the paper's critical stance towards the break-up of Czechoslovakia. A group of journalist, led by Karol Ježík, split from *Smena*, and within a couple of weeks created a new daily newspaper, *SME*. Since its onset, Mečiar's regime used various legal and semi-legal methods to undermine its position, and ruin this newspaper. For example, it arranged that *SME* could not print in a

²⁴⁸ See Adrian Karatnycky, Alexander Motyl, and Charles Graybow eds.: Nations in Transit 1999-2000: Civil Society, Democracy and Markets in East Central Europe and the Newly Independent States (2001, Freedom House, New York) see p. 560 for Freedom House rating since 1989 till 2000.

²⁴⁹ see Ján Fule: "Médiá" in Slovensko 1998-1999 (1999, IVO, Bratislava), pp. 508-608.

printing house that was privatized by people closely connected to MDS. The Editor-in-Chief, Karol Ježík, was arrested and interrogated several times over published articles and news reports criticizing the government. On several occasions, members of government, including Mečiar, sued the newspaper for libel and various damages – the courts, being independent of executive power, did not accept the charges. In October 1997, the association of journalists and publishers of the majority of dailies, again led by *SME*, managed to thwart the most serious threat to free press. The government of Mečiar tried to introduce a disproportionately high tax for the daily newspapers that have any foreign shareholders.²⁵⁰ Considering that all free press had some foreign co-ownership, the tax would ruin them.

The daily *SME* set the tone for all other newspapers that gradually, and mostly only reluctantly, became critical towards the Mečiar government. More than any other medium, *SME* through its objective, critical and courageous work, was in the period 1993-1998 seminal in convincing democratically minded individuals not to give up hope about the future of democracy in Slovakia. Every government coalition misuse of power, every illegal and scandalous act was reported and analyzed on the pages of this daily. *SME* was also instrumental in helping various individuals, professional groups and NGOs in providing space for voicing their concerns, proclamations and appeals to the public. In short, for all those years, *SME* was a medium whereby citizens could get their encouragement, check their political location within the society and be aware that if they

²⁵⁰ Initially, the government proposed a 50 per cent levy on newspapers and journals being co-owned more than 10 per cent by foreign investor. After some pressure it changed to 23 per cent. After protest and international pressure, the Slovak Parliament passed a resolution that a levy of 23 per cent would be laid on newspapers and journals having more than 50 per cent foreign ownership. See Ján Fule in *Slovakia 1997* (1998, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava) p. 3-624.

despair in facing the policies of Mečiar's regime they are not alone. In as much as a newspaper has influence, *SME* truly had such a major impact that a passive, dissatisfied and despairing majority in 1997-1998, became a full blown active civil society that took the fate of its country in its hands.

The evolution and motivation of the other medium, TV Markíza, which also had great influence in defeating Mečiar's regime, was very different than that of *SME*. Its change of direction and joining the opposition to Mečiar was symptomatic for the whole of Slovak society during the Mečiar regime. It would not have received a licence to broadcast had its Slovak founders not been close to MDS and to Mečiar himself. Indeed, Mečiar had first hoped that in Markíza, there would finally be a private medium friendly to his government. At the beginning, TV Markíza did not broadcast any political programs and did not even provide a regular news service. It was commercially successful thanks to popular TV series, but its earnings could not match NOVA, the remarkably successful Czech TV channel which was the most financially successful station in post-communist central Europe for its tabloid news and political reporting. Surely, Markíza wished to emulate its more successful TV station. And to counterbalance the state run TV which flagrantly a mouthpiece of Mečiar's regime might have been seen as a lucrative opportunity for a commercial television station. Markíza owned its license for five years, and knew that Mečiar's government could be troublesome but would not shut down a private TV station. It thus launched in 1997 news broadcasts, political debate programs and investigative journalism, a new phenomenon in Slovakia. There was evidently public demand for such TV programs and, moreover, TV Markíza could benefit financially. Indeed, it succeeded in capturing a very high share of TV audiences –

state TV, considering its highly unprofessional pro-government reporting, was no match for Markíza. So, although Markíza became a mouthpiece for the opposition, it seems it was motivated more by commercial considerations than by striving to support democracy in Slovakia, as was the case with *SME*. This rather cynical calculation by the owners might have been based on their realization that the mood in society was turning against Mečiar, and being in opposition to him could bring financial benefit. In addition, TV Markíza, feeling the strength of its influence, was instrumental in shaping developments within the opposition political scheme.²⁵¹

The government tolerated TV Markíza until the election campaign in August when the Slovak Intelligence Agency (SIS) masterminded a plan to shoot down or neutralize the TV station.²⁵² It failed mainly because for several days thousands of Slovak citizens came to its defence occupying its premises and demanded the resumption of free broadcasting. The SIS backed down and left the TV station to continue to operate. Thus, although important in defeating Mečiar's regime, TV Markíza financially benefited from the already sprawling civil society that needed an independent source of information regarding the government and the opposition.²⁵³

²⁵¹ It has been suggested and widely publicized that the key political leaders emerging after the 1998 elections, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Mikuláš Dzurinda, and the President, Rudolf Schuster, were promoted by the owner of TV Markíza.

²⁵² Fule op. Cit., Slovakia 1998-1999 op.cit.,p.590.

²⁵³ An additional argument that Markíza's decision to become oppositional for commercial reasons is that at the same as it was founded another private TV station, VTV, received a licence. This TV station, from the beginning, explicitly supported Mečiar's government while its rating remained very low. Its operation was terminated in 1999 after it lost financial backing from Mečiar supporters.

2. Why Mečiar did not Become an Autocrat?

There is one nagging question why Mečiar, facing electoral defeat in 1998, did not turn Slovakia into an authoritarian regime and did not manipulate the elections. Why did he not organize a coup when he had all the means and the potential to do so? Considering that during his leadership the laws and the constitution were openly violated and the secret police used criminal tactics to intimidate and even liquidate opponents, what prevented him -- while being alarmed by the opinion polls showing gradual decline of his popularity²⁵⁴ -- from moving one step further and use force in order to remain in power for another four years? It might sound, in retrospect, as an exaggerated argument, but considering the defiance of the constitution and thus the *Rechtsstaat*, such a move was feasible. On the other hand, one could argue that Mečiar, as a populist, was dependent on popular support, believing that what he was doing was good for society and the majority must be convinced of his virtues. Also, possible that until the last moment before the election he believed that he could still win. Indeed, he did everything short of using force to win the favour of the electorates -- he redesigned electoral laws that were to paralyze the opposition parties, led a smear campaign against the opposition leaders in state TV and radio, and unsuccessfully attempted to close the popular TV station, Markiza. The MDS spent a much larger sum of funds on the electoral campaign than the law permitted, and in January 1998 Mečiar's electoral machinery spread the news -- yet

²⁵⁴ Zora Bútorová ed.: Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia: A Public Opinion Profile of a Country in Transition (1997, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava).

another time – that Mečiar was going to be assassinated.²⁵⁵ All this did not work, but it was not because of lack of effort by Mečiar and the MDS. Flashy billboards and an evidently expensive campaign did not fool the majority of Slovaks. On the contrary, it was counter-productive.²⁵⁶

There is yet another line of argument considering Mečiar's *qua* autocrat. He, as a leader in central Europe and not in the Balkans or somewhere in the former USSR, was not as ready to defy democratic order as might be assumed from some of the deeds that took place during his leadership. František Mikloško, a prominent Slovak politician who had known Mečiar since 1990, remarked that Mečiar had several opportunities during his career to resort to radical, violent solutions, especially when his popularity was as high as ninety percent. Yet he never did. He never instigated open violence or called people to take to the streets and fight for him. Instead, Mečiar backed down, each time during a major crisis he disappeared from the scene for several weeks "going to hunt bears", as his associates remarked sardonically.²⁵⁷ In addition, despite his frequent anti-Western rhetoric, he desperately and unsuccessfully sought the company of world political leaders. Yet during the 1993-1998 period, he did not receive a single invitation from any prominent Western leader. Several times he tried desperately to meet with the German

²⁵⁵ The tactics to spread the news about the alleged assassination dates back to 1991 and since then Mečiar returned to this scheme several times since. See *SME* February 5, 1998.

²⁵⁶ The highlight was the invitation of famous movie stars to prop up the Mečiar image. Claudia Cardinale, Claudia Shiffer, Gerard Depardieu or the son of Jean Paul Belmondo seemed odd company next to the uncouth Vladimír Mečiar. Also, it did not help when the voters were told that a one-day visit of these stars cost as much as one half of the expenses allowed by the law for the pre-election campaign.

²⁵⁷ This is based on personal communication with František Mikloško who was one of the core PAV movement members and Chairman of the Slovak Parliament 1990-1992.

Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, or the US President, Bill Clinton, but without success.²⁵⁸ Also, MDS tried everything to become a partner in an international political socialist or liberal grouping, again, without success. The only people who were happily visiting Slovakia were extremist like Russian Vladimir Zhirinovski, French Jean-Marie Le Pen or a number of leaders from former Yugoslavia.

It is not easy in central Europe to be an autocrat, especially if one governs a small country like Slovakia. More feasible is to create an illiberal democracy, which is more acceptable because it fulfills the basic precondition of democracy yet, allows for almost unrestrained control and power. International isolation, restrictions by neighbouring countries and the West, as well as the little assistance an autocrat can obtain from fellow autocrats from the south or east, demonstrate that a leader must pretend and follow the modicum of democratic rules. The Western countries are in a dilemma while facing an illiberal democracy because it is easy to pinpoint the abuse of democratic conduct, but much harder to point out a breach of the spirit of democracy – the complex and delicate political arrangement that constitutes a liberal democracy. This is a paradox explaining the prevalence of illiberal democracies throughout the world where individual countries are unwilling or cannot stay isolated from international interaction yet, thanks to a degree of democratic legitimacy, their leaders are free to act, more or less, as they wish. Thus the leaders of various illiberal democracies pay lip service to democracy yet in many respects defy liberal principles and norms. They allow democratic structure, manipulate but allow elections, and try to avoid as much as possible the checks and balances of their rule. These unique features of illiberal democracies make it a convenient political

²⁵⁸ See Leško, p. 166.

structure for numerous populists, nationalists and fundamentalists and have become prevalent, both among some post-communist countries and also throughout the world.

So it might be stated that Mečiar did not become an autocrat after 1994 simply because it is not easy to become one in a society that can be radicalized, but not to a degree that the necessary zeal among the population can be held indefinitely. There are two seemingly contradictory explanations or reasons for this phenomenon. One is that we accept that an illiberal democracy is, by and large, defeated from within, through a functional civil society that defies excesses and imposes its will on recalcitrant leaders. Steven Holmes who argues that there are several reasons why post-communist countries did not become as radical as was expected within a few years after the fall of Communist regimes offers an alternative explanation for this phenomenon. He titled a section in his article "The Unexpected Weakness of Illiberalism" where he argues that: ²⁵⁹

"[p]ost-communist societies, for some reasons, are largely bereft of zeal. Post-communist man has not been, so far, mobilized in extremist movements because he has not been, so far, mobilized for anything at all. He remains politically inert. He is 'cocooning'.

Holmes does not credit the resistance of these societies to radicalism by emerging civil society that refuses illiberalism in principle, but because citizens distrust politicians and are reluctant to be mobilized by any new ideology. As he argues, "broad swaths of the citizenry in almost every country in the region despise politicians and think that they all are liars and the cheats". Holmes adds that, "no nationwide collective self-interpretation has so far been able to take hold in these disillusioned and distracted, or perhaps

²⁵⁹ Stephen Holmes: "Cultural Legacies or State Collapse? Probing the Postcommunist Dilemma" In Michael Mandelbaum ed.: Postcommunism: Four Perspectives (1996, A Council on Foreign Relations Book, New York) p. 35.

postideological, societies".²⁶⁰ This might be in contradiction to what has been said about the developments in Slovakia during the 1993-1997 period when extremism in Slovakia was rampant, but then in 1998 was defeated. Yet, with certain qualifications these two views might not be as contradictory as they may first appear. Holmes published his article in 1996 when the emerging, vibrant civil society might have still looked like a rare and fragile species. Indeed, in Slovakia the defeat of illiberalism might have been perceived as possible, only thanks to factors put forth by Holmes. Surely these ingredients were present in 1998 in Slovakia, but it is equally possible, as evidence shows, that the defeat of illiberalism was due to internal shifts in political culture connected with the lost legitimacy of populist leaders due to emergence of vibrant civil society.

We can thus state that the most important reason prohibiting Mečiar from becoming an autocrat was a combination of an emerging civil society combined with a dislike for the protracted zeal of extremism among the majority of the population. An additional factors were Slovakia's central European location, international pressure, and Mečiar's reluctance to create an authoritarian country in 1998.

3. The Role of Democratic Opposition

It might be erroneously assumed that the main factor in defeating Mečiar was the action of his political opposition. In fact, that the opposition politicians did not become Mečiar's principal contenders was only partially their fault. There are several reasons why they remained rather placid and defensive, especially between 1994-1997. Their

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p.41.

main concern was to withstand permanent censure and harassment by the government coalition. Thanks to this intimidation, the opposition must have constantly fought for its sheer survival and thus did not have enough energy for exercising standard opposition politics. They were effectively removed from all executive or legislative positions usually allocated for the opposition as well as from state TV and Radio, through which they could have influence or expose the excesses of the Mečiar government. In addition, the parties that opposed Mečiar represented diametrically opposed ideological strains, and, before they created coalition in 1998, they were more divided than united against their common enemy.

Mečiar's political opposition contained parties representing the whole left-right political spectrum. There was the former Communist Party (Party of a Democratic Left), Mečiar's former allies who left MDS (the Democratic Union), the Christian Democratic Party (CDP), former members of Public Against Violence (PAV) since 1996 grouped in the Democratic Party, and finally the Hungarian parties. Altogether these parties somehow reflected the left-right division within the Slovak political scene, each of them represented a different ideological position and outlook and thus they were divided and uncooperative. Mečiar tried to keep the opposition divided and occasionally, when himself in trouble within his own coalition,²⁶¹ tried with some success to lure, especially, the former communists into closer cooperation.

²⁶¹ In June 1996, the government coalition was in a deep crisis that stemmed from a clash between MDS and the Slovak Nationalist Party (SNP) over the position in one lucrative financial institution. Without the support of the SNP, the coalition would be in danger again as it was in 1994. The MDS succumbed to SNP pressure and started to negotiate with the SDL, the former subsequently claiming that it was ready to form a government with the MDS and the Workers Party. The nationalists panicked and without achieving its goals, were back in the coalition. The SDL was left out, and afterwards proclaimed that it would not form a coalition with the MDS if

The opposition united in March 1994 for the second time against Mečiar (first time in 1991), ousting his government and calling early election for September of that year. However, it was due to their lack of unity and a vision that they called the early elections – the decision that they subsequently dearly regretted. Still, forming a government even for six months was a good experience leading to pragmatic cooperation among very diverse political parties. Even the Hungarian parties, demonized and permanently attacked by nationalists and MDS, were taken as partners and, in return, supported the 1994-coalition government. Yet after they lost the early general elections in September, they became again a demoralized and disunited opposition. Mečiar hoped for a much greater victory and did everything to marginalize his opponents and even – as will be described below – tried bogus charges to expel from Parliament his former colleagues-deserters, the Democratic Union party. It was only after general unrest within the population during 1997-1998 that democratically oriented parties in Slovakia united again. However, although facing a common enemy, even that was a reluctant union.

There were several unsuccessful attempts to unify the opposition, but it was only the draconian election law that the governmental coalition passed in 1998 that forced the merger of several parties. First, in 1997, three centrist and right parties formed the so-called "Blue coalition" in order to create a stronger political subject.²⁶² Such a coalition was to guarantee that the representatives of these parties would get to Parliament in the next elections.²⁶³ Later on, in order to enhance its position, the "Blue coalition"

headed by Mečiar. Leško, pp. 162-164.

²⁶² The Christian Democrats, the Democratic Union and the Democratic Party formed the "Blue coalition".

²⁶³ According to Slovak electoral law, each party must receive a minimum of five percent of

accepted two small parties²⁶⁴ hoping to become, after the next election, the strongest political unit. The governmental coalition, trying to undermine this expanded "Blue coalition", passed a law requiring that each party in a coalition must attain at least five per cent of votes.²⁶⁵ So for example, if any single party within the "Blue coalition" did not achieve these five per cent, regardless of the overall percentage of votes gained by the whole coalition, such a coalition would not enter the Parliament. It would be disqualified and its votes were to be distributed among the other parties entering Parliament. An illogical and undemocratic law aimed solely to enhance the chances of the governmental coalition of winning the election. As a reaction to this law, the five parties of the "Blue coalition", merged, with some reluctance, into one party, the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDC). The governmental coalition tried to disqualify even this merger as artificial and calculated accusing SDC of still being a coalition and not a party. Well, artificial and calculated – yes. But it was due to the draconian electoral law that aimed to eliminate the main opposition parties. The appeal one month before the election to the Supreme Court by MDS to disqualify the SDC was repelled.²⁶⁶ Being under strong international pressure, the governmental coalition upheld, this time, the by the Supreme Court.

The opposition democratic parties did not synchronize its steps while fighting Mečiar until only a few months before the election. Hence, they participated only

votes in the election. The coalition of two parties (seven percent) and coalition of three parties (nine percent). Any larger coalition must obtain at least eleven per cent.

²⁶⁴ The Green Party and Social Democratic Party.

²⁶⁵ See Peter Lebovič: "Political Aspects of the Election Law Amendments" In Bútorá, M., Mesežnikov, G., Bútorová, Z, and Fisher, S. eds.: The 1998 Parliamentary Elections and Democratic Rebirth in Slovakia (1999, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava) pp. 43-44.

marginally in the resurrection of a civil society in Slovakia. Only in the Summer of 1998, did the Slovak Democratic Coalition, former Communists (PDL) and the newly created Party of Civic Understanding (PCU) along with the Hungarian Coalition, agree that if victorious, they would cooperate and form a new government. During the period 1994-1998 the opposition was preoccupied by its own survival, its parties often quarreling among themselves and being under constant threats by the populist and nationalist government coalition. So, the opposition can be only partially blamed for its paralysis and inability to participate in the activation of society. The fact remains that it did not act as the catalyst for the emerging civil society. Only in 1998, sensing the defeat of Mečiar, did the opposition start to act together and cooperate, but by then the civil society was active and vibrant.

This "inaction" of the opposition before 1998 had its consequences after the elections when those four parties listed above formed a new government. The new democratic government did not act as swiftly and as radically against the previous government as the outraged population that defeated Mečiar had expected. Instead, it took two months for the new coalition just to form a government, and it did not initiate any radical moves that would try to expropriate embezzled state property and to bring to justice those that were responsible for illiberal democracy in Slovakia. This goes beyond the subject of this study, but politicians who came to power after the 1998 general election – not standing in the forefront in the defeat of Mečiar – possessed only provisional legitimacy among the population. Their legitimacy derived solely from having been political opponents of Mečiar in the election. One can argue that they could

²⁶⁶ Slovensko 1989-1999 op.cit., p. 877.

have retained and built a solid legitimacy had they acted swiftly against the main culprits of the previous government. The population, very much aware of its importance in defeating Mečiar, expected much more radical action after the elections than the government was able and willing to deliver.

4. The Hungarian Minority and Coalition

Before we address the significance of the defeat of Mečiar in the 1998 elections, let us deal with the significance of the Hungarian minority in independent Slovakia. More specifically with the use of Hungarians as a prime motivation that legitimized, in the eyes of many Slovaks, the furtherance of illiberal democracy.²⁶⁷ Hungarians are concentrated along the southern border of Slovakia. This region, bordering with Hungary, has been their ancestral home for many centuries. There is naturally a close affinity between Hungarians from Hungary and Slovakia but a majority of Hungarians in Slovakia recognize the finality of the Trianon Peace Treaty from 1919 that designated the borders of Hungary after World War I. In contrast, the Trianon Treaty is still considered by many Hungarians in Hungary as a tragedy and an act of injustice inflicted upon their country. There are nationalists among Hungarians on both sides of the border, though in the minority, who more or less overtly talk of a Greater Hungary, meaning the inclusion of territories in southern Slovakia, Romania (Transylvania) and Yugoslavia (Vojvodina) where there is a concentration of Hungarian inhabitants. It is this minority sentiment that

²⁶⁷ For a general overview of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, see Peter Hunčík: "Maďarská menšina ve Slovenské republice" [Hungarian minority in Slovak Republic] In Ivan Gabál ed.: Etnické menšiny ve střední Evropě [Ethnic minorities in central Europe](1999, G&G, Prague) pp.

has been used by the nationalists outside Hungary, be it in Slovakia, Romania or Yugoslavia, to placate Hungarians as demanding special rights and privileges as a precursor to autonomy and then separation.

During the Communist era, the ethnic and minority issue did not play any significant role. However, after 1989 and then especially after Slovakia became independent, Hungarians were increasingly the object of great tension within the Slovak political scene. If Czechs were the main target of Slovak nationalists before 1993, afterwards this role was bestowed upon the Hungarians. Being a relatively small minority in a multinational Czechoslovakia was less taxing than becoming the single largest minority in an independent Slovakia.²⁶⁸ Ethnic tension – that was before 1989, according to some, subdued, and according to others relegated to the past – emerged in Slovakia the same as in other multi-ethnic post-communist countries. It must be added that the tensions became more an issue among politicians than a reflection of strain among the Slovak and Hungarian population. Throughout the period of 1989-1998, the least nationalist outbursts were encountered in the region where Slovaks and Hungarians coexisted.²⁶⁹ This peaceful coexistence among the Slovak and Hungarian population was the main reason that ethnic tension did not and, most likely could not, erupt into animosity as was the case in the former Yugoslavia.

204-218 and O. Dostál: "Minorities" in Martin Bútora and Péter Hunčík eds.: Global Report on Slovakia (1997, Sandor Márai Foundation, Bratislava) p.64-74.

²⁶⁸ During the last taken census in 1991, 567,300 inhabitants of Slovakia (10,76%) declared themselves as ethnic Hungarians. O. Dostál op. Cit. P.63 and also Judy Batt op.cit. pp.18-28 for a fair overview of the Hungarian issue in Slovakia.

²⁶⁹ The concentration of nationalistic fervour was greatest in northern Slovakia where no Hungarians have been present.

The deterioration of democratic politics in Slovakia was reflected in increasingly restrictive legal acts regarding minority rights, aiming particularly at the strong Hungarian community. The most pernicious issue was the use of minority languages in official use. Before 1989 Hungarians were allowed to use their own language either at school or in official use.²⁷⁰ This was confirmed by the “official language act” of 1990 legally guaranteeing minority language rights.²⁷¹ However, in 1993 and 1994, the first two years of Slovak independence, the Slovak Parliament, dominated by populist and nationalist legislators, passed several minor but disturbing acts restricting minority rights.²⁷² The most draconian act was passed in 1995 when the Slovak Parliament approved the “Act on the state language of the Slovak Republic” or as it commonly known, “the Language Law”.²⁷³ This act, contrary to international agreement on minority rights and revoking the rights enjoyed by Hungarians in the past, prevented minority languages in official use, and attempted to restrict instruction in minority languages in primary and secondary schools. This was clearly against the Slovak Constitution, which guaranteed the rights of minorities to use their language in official use. However, Hungarian politicians in Slovakia and Hungary, as well as international

²⁷⁰ There was an exception with respect to Ruthenians who live in eastern Slovakia and are divided according to religious faith – Orthodox and Uniates. The Communists favored the Orthodox Church and gradually expropriated Uniate churches and denied freedom of worship to non-orthodox Ruthenians. The preference of the Orthodox religion was mainly due to the connection with Russian Orthodox Church that was rather sympathetic to the Communist regime.

²⁷¹ See Ondrej Dostál op. Cit. P.67-68.

²⁷² In 1993 it was the act on the name register preventing spelling of names in Hungarian. In 1994 it was the so-called “road sign” act forbidding dual names of towns and villages that had more than 20 per cent minority population. See Dostál op.cit. p. 64.

²⁷³ See Dostál op.cit., pp. 64-66.

pressure, prevented the Slovak government from fully implementing this law. In addition, on the local level where the relationship between Hungarians and Slovaks was the least tense, the law was simply ignored.

The formation of the Hungarian political parties during the period 1989-1998 reflected the developments and turmoil within Slovakia. The first Hungarian party, later renamed the Hungarian Civic Party, was, during the first election in 1990, in coalition with Public Against Violence (PAV). Gradually, two other Hungarian parties emerged: Hungarian Christian Democrats and the nationalistically oriented Coexistence Party (Együttélés). These parties were competing for the ethnic votes, but, as attacks from the side of nationalists and populists increased, they gradually formed a united front. Fearing their fate in an independent Slovakia, dominated by nationalist rhetoric, Hungarians realized the danger of their disunity and merged the act which was determined by a single common denominator – their ethnicity. And they had good reason to fear the policies of the Mečiar government whose ideological guidelines with respect to Hungarians were set by the radical and militant Slovak National Party (SNP) as was described in Chapter II (Section 1).

For the SNP and Mečiar's MDS, Hungarians were an ideal enemy. Considering the memory of Hungarian policies in the second half of the 19th century depicted in Chapter II, Hungarians could be stained with all the stereotypes and fears subconsciously present in the psyche of many Slovaks. Nationalists, soon after 1989 and especially after 1993 along with the MDS, successfully waged an anti-Hungarian campaign and many Slovaks supported them, mainly due to the harsh policies against Hungarians. Even the majority of democratically minded Slovak politicians were reluctant to be closely

associated with Hungarian politicians, fearing defection of their voters. A number of laws mentioned above that deprived Hungarians of various rights, were condoned or tolerated even by some MPs who were in opposition to the Mečiar coalition. Increasingly, as the Slovak opposition was unable or unwilling to stand behind their Hungarian colleagues, the Hungarians became rightfully afraid of their position as scapegoats, and were used by the coalition as objects of scorn and mobilization support. Hence, the Hungarians increasingly appealed to international organizations and governments for help in preserving their rights. This legitimate activity even more outraged the nationalists who considered this as a campaign to damage what they called “the good image of Slovakia abroad”. The international community was following developments in Slovakia with concern, and on several occasions urged the Slovak government to soften its policies towards minorities. However, ethnic tension being the *raison d’etre* of nationalist policies, the anti-Hungarian policies did not diminish.

The result was that the treatment of minorities, and particularly the Hungarian minority, was set as a measuring stick assessing the democratization process of Slovakia by the EU, the Council of Europe and NATO. The main source of contention was the 1995 Language Law that contained a provision – never enacted by the Mečiar government – stipulating that the minority language in official use will be dealt with by a separate law. Numerous visiting Western politicians, who insisted that it was stipulated in the Constitution and repeatedly promised by the government coalition, constantly requested this particular law. Passing such a law, however, would have been perceived by nationalists as a major concession to Hungarians. The MDS argued that Hungarians had nevertheless an adequate and even disproportionate number of rights, often

comparing their condition with other countries. This was clever demagoguery because Hungarians did not compare their lot with other minorities elsewhere, but by their position in the past and as stipulated by the EU, in those respects their rights had been curtailed.²⁷⁴

As the political condition in Slovakia worsened in the late 1990s, and as it became more radicalized, the Hungarian parties started to cooperate more closely with other opposition parties. Their own ideological diversities were pushed aside and were replaced by a growing ethnic affinity that in time of common threat received priority. The politically diverse Hungarian parties were forced to become first a coalition, and then one party based on ethnic principle due to the draconian policies of the government that also forced the creation of the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDC). The 1998 electoral law, mentioned above, and which was mainly aimed against the SDC, also affected the Hungarian coalition. Hence the latter merged in 1998 into one party in order to assure its presence in parliament. As a coalition of three parties, and steadily receiving around 11-12 per cent of votes reflecting the proportion of Hungarians living in Slovakia, the new electoral law would have excluded Hungarians from politics. The Hungarian Coalition merged into one party that contained liberals, Christian democrats, and former

²⁷⁴ The author of these lines, as a representative of US NGO Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) in Slovakia, closely co-operated with opposition politicians in 1996-1997 on drafting a Minority Language Law that would eliminate the excesses of the 1995 Language Law. Interestingly, the Law that was, after much delay, finally passed in June 1999 by the Slovak Parliament did not reflect the widely circulated version of the much more appropriate drafted law. Despite the Hungarian Coalition being in the government coalition, there was no will among the Slovak coalition partners to pass a comprehensive law. They usually argued that it was out of fear that the majority of Slovak citizens would be outraged. It was only the European Charter of Minority Rights passed in January 2001 that, at last, effectively guarantees minority rights, including language rights for the Hungarian minority. It seems that respecting international agreements and laws is of great importance in enforcing the rights of minorities in post-communist countries. The

Communists as well as nationalists. Not an ideal condition, but it was simply reflecting the political condition and scene in Slovakia in 1998.

Since 1993, Hungarian parties were accepted as partners of democratically oriented parties although there has always been a degree of tension and mistrust that has made the partnership conditional. In 1994 Hungarians did not enter the interim government that toppled Mečiar, but were "silent" partners assuring the coalition majority in the Parliament. The 1996 "blue coalition" of Slovak democratic parties negotiated with Hungarian parties (except the nationalistically oriented Együttélés) but the accusation by the Mečiar government that they had signed an agreement was vehemently denied by Slovak parties. It was still considered by Slovak democratic parties to be politically imprudent to enter into partnership with the Hungarians in an atmosphere where the nationalists and populists, using state media, raised anti-Hungarian sentiment, and among others, accused the Hungarians of conspiring to secede and planning to create a Greater Hungary".²⁷⁵ Finally, in 1998, the anti-Mečiar coalition accepted the Hungarian Coalition Party, and it was a step forward in inter-ethnic relationships in Slovakia. As with many other things, it reflected a public mood that was more tolerant and democratically oriented, exposing the "ethnic game" of nationalists. The mood switched from "Slovaks vs. Hungarians" into "democratically minded" vs. "nationalists

Rights that would not be provided by the governments themselves. See publication and activities of PER at www.netcom.com/~ethnic/PER.html

²⁷⁵ "Greater Hungary" encompasses the territory of Hungary from before 1918. After the peace Treaty of Trianon in 1919, present day Slovakia and Transylvania (now in Romania) were separated from Hungary. Further territory was carved out of what is now part of Ukraine and Yugoslavia (Vojvodina). The "Greater Hungary" is evoked repeatedly as every new Prime Minister of Hungary since 1989. In inaugural speeches, they have declared that they are "the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians" –evidently including the Hungarians living outside of Hungary, which itself has around 10 million inhabitants.

and populists". This new division and crystallization within Slovak society represented a great leap forward within Slovak political culture. However, even this partnership did not bury old mistrust and stereotypes prevalent among both sides. Soon after the victory of democratically oriented parties in September 1998, the Party of the Democratic Left (PDL – the former Communists) suggested that Hungarians should be excluded from the next government coalition, citing the discrepancy of views between them and the Hungarians. The other Slovak parties rebuffed the PDL and the public was outraged by this plan.²⁷⁶ For the future, the treatment of minorities will be the litmus test of the degree of democratization and the state of civil society in Slovakia.

When we speak about minorities we have in mind not only the Hungarian but also the Roma minority that is subject to great mistreatment and discrimination throughout post-communist societies.²⁷⁷ In Slovakia estimates vary about the number of Roma, but, according to the most realistic figures, Slovakia has, considering the whole population, the highest concentration of Roma in the world. If animosity and ethnic tension towards Hungarians exist mainly among supporters of nationalist and populist parties, and more in northern than southern Slovakia where the inhabitants do not come in contact with Hungarian inhabitants, the case of ethnic animosity towards the visibly different Roma minority is much worse and across the board. Even the most democratically minded, and even many intellectuals, display a degree of stereotypes and prejudices that makes the

²⁷⁶ The reason for PDL suggesting the exclusion of Hungarians was that, without Hungarians, the coalition would have absolute majority in the Parliament. So the coalition could technically survive and govern without Hungarians.

²⁷⁷ See Michal Vašečka: "Roma and the 1998 Parliamentary Election" In The 1998 Parliamentary... op.cit. pp. 255-263 and M. Vašečka: "Rómovia" in Kollar, M and Mesežnikov,

Roma issue the most explosive problem for the future. Low social and economic status, high criminality and the demographic explosion of Roma, is viewed as an unsolvable problem. In addition, there seems to be no will either on the side of democratic politicians or the general public to try to do something to address this cardinal problem within Slovak society in the future. If unattended, the Roma issue is a time bomb that might bury the fragile Slovak civil society. In this respect, Slovakia's membership of NATO and the EU would set the rules of conduct, and would help to improve the state of civil society in Slovakia. Within the borders of these international communities, Slovak nationalists and populists would find less space and would encounter greater discouragement to attack either Hungarian or Roma minorities.

5. The Fall of Illiberal Democracy

Describing *how* the Mečiar regime was defeated in 1998 has been relatively simple, what is difficult is to account for *why* it came about and what the consequences of this development are for the future of Slovakia. A standard explanation might go as follows: the defeat of Mečiar's regime in September 1998 was a culmination of the unfolding of events that, for the previous two-three years, had awakened a society unwilling to tolerate arrogance, nepotism and the illegal actions of a semi-authoritarian regime. That is a regime that also caused the exclusion of Slovakia from the list of countries acceding to NATO and the EU.²⁷⁸ Yet there are two other causes – free

G. eds.: Slovensko 2000: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti [Slovakia 2000: A comprehensive report on the state of society] (2000, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava) pp. 191-238.

²⁷⁸ The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland became members of NATO in 1999. Despite a change of government in Slovakia in 1998, it was relegated from the list of first post-communist countries admitted to the NATO.

media, the NGOs and international pressure – that contributed to the fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia.

An authoritarian or any ruthless regime, as we know from Tocqueville, usually falls when it tries to reform itself. It lets its enemies act and, at the first opportunity, those enemies overtake the weakened regime. In the case of an illiberal democracy led by a populist leader, victory, more or less, in a democratic election is *sine qua non* of its existence and this exemplifies the fact that the mechanism of rule is different between authoritarian and illiberal regimes. The latter must find a way to convince voters that what it does is either good for them or inevitable for the future welfare of the society, or at least its majority, or provide an appropriate culprit that prevents them bringing about the prosperity of society. The worst enemy of an illiberal regime is exposure of its excesses in free media, where what is officially proclaimed differs sharply from what is actually taking place. The official propaganda must undermine the free press, and police and government must intimidate it as much as possible. It is a war over the information a citizen receives.

Thanks to free media, the population during 1993-1998 was continually informed about the excesses of the regime and the general deterioration of the Slovak political system. The majority of the population became increasingly restless, and protests, petitions, proclamations by individuals, professional groups and trade unions acted as a means of defiance of the power to be. This simmering of civic activity was, in 1998, overtaken and navigated first by NGOs, and then by the political parties. The NGOs in particular, grouped in the 'Council of Third Sector' that contained more than one

thousand NGOs, supported and initiated activities helping to strengthen the civil society in Slovakia.²⁷⁹

The extensive pre-election campaign by NGOs in support of "free and just elections" which had already commenced in March 1998, was responsible for the high turn out by voters in general (84.24% from all eligible voters!). Also significant was a high turn out of young voters during the September 1998 elections²⁸⁰. Its goal was to spread information about the importance of elections, and to assure the monitoring of the elections by Slovak citizens and international observers. Pavol Demeš, the leader of the Council of Third Sector writes: "without much ado it can be stated that the 1998 election, without tens of NGOs and hundreds of volunteers, without the participation of an unprecedented number of young people, would have proceeded differently and with different results".²⁸¹ Indeed, in comparison with elections in 1992 and 1994 when Mečiar and nationalists won, the role both of free media (especially TV) and the NGOs in 1998 was decisive. We can state that Slovak society by 1998 was altered, thanks also to the activities of NGOs and free media.

Yet, it is clear from the analysis of illiberal democracies around the globe that excesses of various kinds, and information about them, is necessary but not sufficient to defeat an illiberal regime. The population might feel disgusted, can become cynical and defeatist about their hopeless position, and withdraw sulking into the privacy of its suffering. Yet revealing excesses of a ruthless regime does not automatically propel civic

²⁷⁹ See Freedom House Report 1999-2000 op.cit., pp.563-566.

²⁸⁰ See Vladimír Krivý "Výsledky volieb v rokoch 1998 a 1999" [The results of 1998 and 1999 Presidential elections] in Slovensko: 1998-1999, pp. 115-147.

action in defense of democracy and freedom. The cases of Yugoslavia, Belarus and Russia are prime examples where an illiberal regime paralyzed the opposition, and through propaganda managed to keep the majority of the brainwashed population in line defending the regime. In Slovakia during 1993-1998, free media, propaganda and intimidation coexisted along with excesses of the regime. Yet the majority of citizens were ready to risk their security in order to defend the free press, and to mobilize society in order to defeat the illiberal regime. The reason for this was, however, not only due to free access of information, but due to the state of political culture in Slovakia. It was manifested in the lost legitimacy of populist and nationalist leaders. Despite the latter propaganda, despite the legacy of Communism and a distorted historical memory, the majority of the population, when offered populist demagoguery and its impartial criticism as well as an appeal to the values of democracy and freedom, chose the latter. Evidently, the state of political culture, i.e., the way citizens perceived political leaders and acted upon political affairs, had changed in Slovakia by 1998. It differed from political culture as we described it during the Communist normalization period 1969-1989, it changed since Czechoslovakia was divided and it changed still since 1994, when the last free elections provided legitimacy for leaders who established an illiberal regime.

6. International Pressure

The other factor that facilitated the fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia was the role played by international institutions and foreign governments. It had a double effect

²⁸¹ Pavol Demeš: "The Third Sector and Voluntarism" in Slovensko: 1998-1999 p. 624.

on Slovak society. First, external pressure on the Slovak government prevented the latter from fully implementing its illiberal policies and from claiming that its Western partners condoned its action. Even more decisive was the impact on the general population as a result of frequent protests, diplomatic demarchés from Western governments and especially the exclusion in 1997 of Slovakia from the list of candidates entering NATO and the EU as the first post-communist countries. The government of Mečiar was in a permanent schizophrenic position *vis-a-vis* Western governments and international bodies monitoring conditions in Slovakia. On the one hand it claimed that all its actions were fully in accordance with liberal democratic practice, and on the other hand its excesses presented as the internal affairs of a sovereign country with its democratically elected government. Most notorious were the government's attempts to convince foreign journalists and diplomats that conditions in Slovakia were in no way different than in the neighboring Czech Republic or Hungary. Its heralded pro-Western and democratic position abroad and illiberal practice at home gradually came to such a tension that the Mečiar government became more and more anti-Western and even turned to Russia for support and alliance. However, by 1997, when the Slovak Intelligence Agency (SIS) was implicated as being involved in the kidnapping the of President's son, and the government refused to implement several findings of the Supreme Court, overt anti-Western propaganda began to seep into the state media and in the rhetoric of state officials. After the great success in Milošević's Yugoslavia of Noam Chomsky's films blasting Western and especially US politics, Slovak Television broadcast it as well – with no effect. Increasingly government officials were making official and unofficial trips to

Russia trying, unsuccessfully, to find a strong ally there.²⁸² All these government activities, coupled with the international isolation of Slovakia, undermined the Mečiar regime in the eyes of an increasing number of Slovaks who might previously have voted for his party.

Two individuals must be highlighted as the most outspoken foreign critics of Mečiar's government. One was the High Commissioner for Minorities at the Council of Europe Committee, Max van der Stoel, and the other was then the US Ambassador to Slovakia, Ralph Johnson. Max van der Stoel had been a veteran defender of human rights of dissidents and especially Charter 77 movement during the "Normalization" period. After 1989, he was actively involved in minority politics in Slovakia, was particularly involved in the plight of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, and made frequent trips to Slovakia and consulted politicians, journalists and NGO representatives. He could hardly be accused of impartiality because only after much deliberation and many attempts to convince the Slovak government to change its minority policies, did van der Stoel decide to criticize the Mečiar government. It was thanks to his activities that both the European Union and NATO cited the sorry state of minority politics of the Slovak government as the main reason for expelling Slovakia from the list of first candidates for membership in these organizations.

²⁸² The frequent changes in Russia's leadership during this period made it difficult for Slovak officials to form any permanent alliance. When it seemed, for example that one Russian Prime Minister was eager to set a close alliance with Slovakia, he was soon out of office and his successor was less interested with closer links. There were even reports in the Slovak press in 1997 that Slovakia might become another member of Russia's Commonwealth. Whether or not this was a rumour, is hard to say. The outrage over such an idea in the public put paid to any further reports.

The US Ambassador, Ralph Johnson, who was based in Slovakia from 1992-1998, became – unusually for a diplomat – an outspoken critic of the Mečiar government. He could not be accused of being misinformed and misled by the opposition or the media. He mastered the Slovak language and thus knew the evolution of Slovak politics better than most of the Western observers. What was unusual for a foreign diplomat in Slovakia was that Johnson frequently traveled around Slovakia, and gave very frank and well informed speeches about conditions in, and bleak prospects for, Slovakia. He tried to distance himself from the political opposition and was constantly in consultation with the government. At one point, a Slovak foreign minister, irritated by Johnson's critical remarks, expressed the view that the US Ambassador was one diplomat among many based in Bratislava, and that his criticism was irrelevant.²⁸³ However, the Slovak government was rather reluctant to accuse outspoken and well informed Johnson, as it permanently did other foreign politicians, as being influenced and misinformed by the Slovak opposition leaders or journalists. A US Ambassador carried weight even in the eyes of most ardent nationalists, not least, for being the representative of the USA in Slovakia.

Thus, the activities of Ralph Johnson and Max van der Stoep in Slovakia, show the effectiveness and usefulness that permanent pressure by influential foreign politicians and diplomats can have on a government that is democratic in structure but illiberal in spirit. The Slovak government often accused other Western critics for being either misinformed,

²⁸³ The Foreign Minister was Pavol Hamžík who a few months later resigned and joined the then opposition. After the 1998 elections he became the Deputy Prime Minister. In Marian Leško: Masky a Tváre novej elity: Čítanie o dvanástich politikoch z piatich vládnych strán [Masks and faces of the new elite: a reading about twelve politicians from five governmental parties] (2000, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava) p.157.

lobbying for either the opposition or Hungary, or merely harming Slovakia. These two individuals, impartial, objective and well informed, were a nuisance to the Slovak government attempting to cover up its illiberal policies and make them appear harmless and no different than action in other countries. It was also an opportunity for the Slovak independent media, quoting these two Westerners, to report on government excesses without fear of being sued or harassed. Hence a diplomat or well-informed Western politician openly reporting the action of an illiberal democratic regime, imposes more pressure on such a regime, and is more effective and useful, than pressure coming from other quarters. It indirectly helps the democratic opposition and encourages intimidated and disillusioned politicians and public figures to confront an illiberal government.

Review

To sum up, in this Chapter we accounted for internal and external factors contributing to the fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia. It became clear that in order to defeat Mečiar's government, besides a shift in the overall political culture of society, it is necessary to have free media as well as an extended web of NGOs to expose the excesses of the regime. This synergic effect was complemented by permanent pressure by Western diplomats and politicians. The key factor that allowed the permanent external pressure on the Slovak government was its treatment of minorities, specifically the Hungarian minority. However, neither free media nor external pressure, nor resistance of a strong minority is sufficient in order to oust illiberal leadership unless the political culture of the majority of the population is ready to vote out such a leadership during the general election. In other words, the defeat of illiberal democracy requires a decline of legitimacy of the leadership among the majority of the population as outlined in Table I (Chapter I). This discrepancy between overall political culture and aims and policies of the government was the key factor in the defeat of illiberal democracy in Slovakia.

Conclusion

Illiberal Democracy and Beyond

Overview

In the following conclusion the aim is to assess how the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter I was applied and utilized in the subsequent chapters in order to comprehend the rise and fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia. More specifically to assess how the evidence and analysis introduced in Chapters II-VI confirmed the validity of an independent variable as a tool for examining the evolution of post-communist transformation. In other words, how could an analyst evaluate the state of, and potential outcome in, a post-communist society judging from the legitimacy of political leaders. What can we learn from the 1998 change in Slovakia about the dynamics of transforming political systems? Is there any general lesson one could utilize in countries other than Slovakia in the future? The fall of illiberal democracy in 1998 seems unprecedented in Slovak history, but is the positive shift in Slovak political culture permanent or is it reversible? Now, in our quest for these answers, we will assess the prospects of Slovakia.

1. Illiberal vs. Liberal Tradition in Slovakia

Let us first assess how the individual chapters contributed towards the theoretical scheme as outlined in Chapter I. The basic thesis in the Chapter I is that both long-term factors such as the history, political culture and legacy of the Communist regime, and short-term factors such as contingencies of post-communist transformation, do not adequately account for the rise and fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia during the period 1989-1998. In order to assess this development we used the concept of illiberal democracies as described by analyst Fareed Zakaria and used as independent variable the legitimacy of political leaders. The latter concept, along with consideration of long-term

and short-term factors, allowed us more accurately to analyze the reasons for the fall of illiberal democracy in Slovakia in 1998. The Table I of this chapter was designed to account for and anticipate developments in both Slovakia and also in other post-communist societies.

Chapter II presented two historical processes – antidemocratic and democratic – that influenced the nature of the post-communist transformation in Slovakia. First, it showed how stereotypical perceptions of the past influenced the relationship of Slovaks towards the Hungarians and Czechs. In essence, the Communist regime's deliberate aim to transform the historical memory of its citizens had a negative effect on the state of political culture in Slovakia. The vast majority of the population after 1989 lost the power of critical reflection. Consequently, this loss of memory makes Slovakia susceptible to a nationalist and populist rhetoric that denigrated and blamed others and viewed Slovak nation as an innocent society, which for centuries had been vanquished and subjected. Whoever questioned this view was presented as a pariah and "an enemy of the Slovak nation". This strategy worked well during the first years of transformation. It won popularity and granted legitimacy to leaders who saw liberalism as a tool of Western influence, which they claimed, in a sense, not different from the Soviet domination before 1989.

This historical chapter also outlined the subdued, yet very present, democratic political culture – a political culture rooted in the Christian ethics and moral tradition of the Habsburg Monarchy and the positive experience of the first democratic Czechoslovak Republic from 1918-1939. Significant was also the experience related to the reforms that occurred in the 1960s. Most likely, the strongest positive influence on Slovak political

culture were these reforms of 1960s, so strong because they were still remembered by a large portion of the population after 1989. One can argue that the experience of these reforms and traditions contributed to the reversal of illiberal politics and restoration of a liberal democratic government in Slovakia in 1998. Not surprisingly, in other post-communist illiberal democracies such as Belarus or Ukraine where such tradition and experiences has been lacking, illiberal democracy still prevails.

Chapter III illustrated how the long-term factors, particularly, the experience during the last two decades of communist rule, the so-called “Normalization period”, interacted with the contingencies of the first years of transformation. Here we considered how these factors affected the overall political culture of Slovakia, which seemed to be caught by surprise and unprepared for the sudden fall of the Communist regime. The result was an upsurge of nationalism and a crisis for the Czechoslovak federation, leading eventually to division of that state in 1992. The legacy of the Communist regime and emergence of illiberal democracy in Slovakia were presented as interconnected through – among other things – the mishandling of secret police files. Equally significant was the obsolescence of the democratic leaders who came to power immediately after 1989, first losing their position while unable to stop a populist, Vladimír Mečiar. They failed to judge the disposition of the Slovak population, which resulted in the decline of their legitimacy among the majority of the population.

Chapter IV presented an analysis of the principal actors responsible for the division of Czechoslovakia. The break-up was partially due to the inability of the democratically oriented Czech and Slovak political leaders to find an adequate constitutional framework for the Czech and Slovak Federation. This simple factor was

the main fault of the politicians who assumed power after November 1989. This inaction, combined with bleak economic conditions, allowed the Slovak separatists to bring about a constitutional impasse while the populist party of Vladimír Mečiar's gained widespread popularity. The increasingly discontent and confused Slovak population voted for populists and separatists during the June 1992 elections after which the break-up of Czechoslovakia was a *fait accompli*. And this took place despite the fact that the majority of the population had been against the separation of the federation.

The last two chapters dealt with the period from 1993-1998 when, after the break-up of Czechoslovakia, illiberal democracy was gradually established and then subsequently defeated. It showed how two diametrically opposite legacies from the past – democratic and non-democratic traditions – clashed over the nature of the regime in Slovakia. This chapter also considered how a number of politicians who were first allies of Mečiar, left him because they could not tolerate the international isolation of Slovakia or the gradual removal of the rule of law. The emergence of civil society in Slovakia was presented as a revival of democratic traditions, coupled with a gradual discontent with the illiberal policies of Vladimír Mečiar. It was also argued that without the activities of the free media, NGOs and international pressure, this turn of events in Slovakia would have been impossible. An interesting phenomenon during this period was the unwillingness – or even fear – of the Mečiar regime to impose an outright authoritarian regime even though the leadership was aware that it would be defeated during the general election in 1998. Several reasons for this development were offered. First, this partially was due to the geographical position of Slovakia, a position where an authoritarian regime in central Europe has little chance to prevail. Second, Mečiar was afraid to defy the will of a

majority which was gradually less and less willing to support a leadership that was responsible for the embezzlement of state property, defiance of the *Rechtsstaat* and the international isolation of Slovakia. The last chapter also presented the obsolescence of the opposition parties in the process of defeating the illiberal leadership – an important factor that influenced political conditions after 1998.

2. Citizens vs. Political Leaders

The reason to locate an independent variable in our analysis was due to an inability to assess the influence of long-term historical factors and contingent development after 1989 on the shape of post-communist transformation in Slovakia. The legitimacy of political leaders as the independent variable served as an analytical tool that helped to explain why illiberal democracy was first established and then defeated in 1998. Although the politicians themselves influenced the nature of political development after 1989, their action was restricted by the nature of the society they governed. Also, their manoeuvring depended on the degree to which they were able to use or misuse the various degree of legitimacy they possessed. If their legitimacy was high, they could shape the political agenda to a greater extent; if it was low, almost any tactics or policies seemed doomed to fail.

Thanks to the politicians with a high degree of legitimacy, there were false notions among a number of students of the post-communist transformation that every political elite is fully responsible for the shape and nature of various societies. Indeed, there is always a temptation to assert that the political elite mainly shapes the development of a political system that is being built from scratch. Because of these false

notions, the government in charge of running the state is blamed for every existing problem. No doubt, in the condition of post-communist transformation, the political leaders are important in influencing the direction in which society proceeds. But more accurately, the political elite is a reflect the condition of any given society, the elite is part and parcel of society's heritage and political culture, along with the unpredictable circumstances that a post-communist transformation induces.

The legitimacy of political leaders – the independent variable – can be perceived as an important indicator informing us under what conditions illiberal democracy is formed or dislodged, either in a post-communist or any other society. It became clear that it emerges when populist and nationalist leaders enjoy a high degree of legitimacy and can proceed with undemocratic steps that the majority of the population condones, tolerates or does nothing to prevent. Thus it is "imposed" by popular leaders who function within a democratic political framework. This is a paradox commonly present at the end of the 20th century and is likely to prevail henceforth where a democratic structure is present, but where very delicate liberal principles are only partially applied or fully absent. The reason is that liberalism is about values and principles of civil society, whereas democracy is limited solely to the recognition of the voice of the majority or of a "general will". Therefore, liberalism and democracy are related but separate entities. Indeed, the will of the majority in a democracy is *sine qua non* even if the rights of a minority are mistreated or restricted. Actually, the democratic structure may provide protection to populists who enjoy popular support and thus legitimacy with the majority. This is an entirely modern phenomenon induced by the fact that the democratic nation-state is the most sovereign entity of international political systems. As Fareed Zakaria

claims, “illiberal democracy is a growth industry” and “it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism”.²⁸⁴ Liberal democracies are reluctant to intervene in the internal affairs of a sovereign nations unless its regime starts to persecute on massive scale its ethnic or other minorities as was, for example, the case of Kosovo Albanians in Yugoslavia in 1999. The case of modern illiberal democracy is thus more reminiscent of 19th century democracies before they were coupled with liberal principles in the 20th century where, in the latter case, not the disposition of politicians but the rule of law protected by independent judiciary has been essential. In a modern illiberal democracy, populist and nationalist leaders enjoy the support of the majority, yet often defy the rule of law and the rights of various minorities – ethnic, confessional or political.

Complications arise when the populist and nationalist leaders start to lose widespread popular support. Their defeat might not be immediately guaranteed because international intervention in these societies that are nominally democratic, is limited. In addition, the illiberal leadership has the liberty to manipulate public opinion, and therefore the electorate is not able to see through its illiberal tactics. Although the *Rechtsstaat* is not removed as it is in an authoritarian regime, it is under constant attack and threat. Hence, great many states that are illiberal democracies are left to their own resources to rescue liberal democracy. This was so in the Slovakia of 1998. Is it thus not automatic that a population that is dissatisfied with its autocratic or illiberal political leaders, be disposed to prefer a liberal democratic government, is able to gather enough energy to overcome it. If the electorate is docile and intimidated by a regime, illiberal

²⁸⁴ “The Rise of Illiberal Democracies” op. Cit., p. 24.

democracy can continue to exist indefinitely as has been the case of Belarus. There seems to be no alternative to this predicament because the other option would be policing legitimate democracies, and that is unacceptable in a post-Westphalian conception of sovereign states.

It has been clear from our analysis of post-communist Slovakia that a liberally-oriented government is not able to impose a liberal democracy and a market economy on a population that is under strong economic and social stress, and political dislocation, as was the case after the fall of the Communist regimes. Indeed, if the degree of the legitimacy of political leaders is a crucial aspect of rising or falling illiberal democracy, then what is decisive is how political leaders assess the disposition of the population and what information the population has at its disposal. As was shown in Table I of Chapter I, if a liberally oriented government is not competent enough to judge the population's disposition and assess its main predicaments, then it might be deposed and replaced by a government that would drive the country into becoming an illiberal democratic regime. The political leaders in an illiberal democracy are able to use all the powers at their disposal to marginalize their opponents, intimidate the free press and use the loyal media to win enough electoral support while keeping the rest of the population passive and frustrated.²⁸⁵ Thus the dissonance between political leadership and the population is only a potential cause for change. Conversely, the dissonance between the illiberal

²⁸⁵ This is the phenomenon of so-called "silent majority" where, according to opinion polls, the majority is against political leadership. However, because of general passivity and frustration, those that would potentially vote against illiberal leaders do not participate in the election. The high electoral participation in Slovakia in the 1998 election, especially of young voters, was the case of mobilization of those who, if they had been absent at the ballot, would have meant the continuation of Mečiar's leadership. See Michal Ivantýšin, Marian Velšic, and Zora Bútorová: "First-Time Voters" in Zora Bútorová ed.: Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia op.cit. pp. 135-150.

leadership and society might not be sufficient to dislodge illiberal democracy. There is a need for internal resurgence (or emergence) of civil society supported by free media, active NGOs and combined with intensive pressure from outside.

We saw the emergence of civil society and the gradual loss of legitimacy of the governmental coalition as the main drive in reawakening the spirit to fight for the return of democracy in Slovakia before 1998. Mečiar's government was frequently reminded by the free media and foreign diplomats that: it must follow international agreements and the laws of its own country; that certain acts were illegal or anti-democratic; and that these actions would result in the isolation of the whole society. The society at large could compare the policies of the government and its internal and external critics. In order to succeed, the population had to have an option to choose from. It was thus essential that the population be provided with objective information about the activities of both. There seems to be no short cuts to liberal democracy. What remained was the painful and slow process of convincing the population of what was in their long-term interest. Without free media and outside pressure, there is very little chance that illiberal democracy in Slovakia would have been defeated. It helped to turn the energy of a disaffected population from resignation to political activism.

In general, then, if the population is sufficiently convinced that their government is acting against its interests, it will defy the illiberal government in free and fair elections. If the society is mature enough, it will choose liberal democracy; if the civil society is only in its nascent stage, populists and nationalists are easily able to sway it onto their side, whatever is the outside pressure, and regardless of what the free media is broadcasting. This seems the only, though complicated, road to escape from the grip of

illiberal democracy. To conclude, in order to prevent the emergence of illiberal democracy, there is a need for a combination of the following factors: (1) a responsible and responsive democratically-oriented leadership; (2) the availability of objective information through free media; (3) and finally a population that is determined to stand up against the encroachment of its rights and freedoms.

3. Lessons of 1998

The next task is to draw the lesson from the defeat in 1998 of illiberal democracy in Slovakia. First, the analysis of Slovakia during the 1989-1998 period showed that the rise and fall of illiberal democracy was conditioned by the internal dynamics of a society in transition influenced by historical, internal and external contingencies. Democratic politicians must judge the condition of political culture and try to formulate policies accordingly. If they are not successful, then populist leaders could misuse the frustration of the population and promise short-term benefits, causing damage in long-term. This is why democratic politicians must seek compromises and constantly endeavour to explain that such 'promises' will be harmful. Second, while the role of the free media, the NGOs and permanent international pressure is indispensable, it is not sufficient for the defeat of illiberal regimes. However, although they will not defeat illiberal democracy, they may prevent the worst excesses. In the end, what is needed is a conviction of the general population that what is offered by populists and nationalists is damaging for the whole society in the long-term. In other words, the defeat of illiberal democracy requires a certain critical mass of dissatisfied and mobilized citizens ready to act against a corrupt

and aggressive government. It must be stressed, however, that this is neither easily attainable nor an automatic and inevitable outcome of any of the post-communist societies that are economically, politically and socially unstable.

There is yet another lesson to be learned when considering the period after 1989. During this time it was learned that illiberal democracy requires swift and radical action by the elected democratic politicians. The public, being mobilized to act for the resurrection of liberal democracy, expects swift punishment against those who abuse democracy. The heightened expectations of the civil society must not be disappointed because disillusion might set in, thus making the population vulnerable to yet another barrage of populist rhetoric. The case of Slovakia is significant in this respect. The democratic opposition that took over the reigns of power from Mečiar in 1998, reestablished the rule of law and guaranteed liberal-democratic rights and freedoms in Slovakia, and, in this respect, responded positively to the general atmosphere in Slovakia. However, the democratic leaders did very little to act against those who before 1998 abused political power and defied laws and the constitution, nor did they prosecute the main culprits who privatized state property for a fraction of the real price. For more than two years after the defeat of Mečiar's government, not a single person was sentenced, and only a fragment of embezzled property was recovered. Most of the fictitious contracts made at the last moment to the benefit of Mečiar's cronies before Mečiar left office, mostly have been met or compensated.

This was the unfortunate path for the health of democracy in Slovakia after 1998 where the electorate that had voted Mečiar out did not see the new government repair the damage left by the previous administration. Instead of trying to work together and

sustaining the trust of the majority of the electorate, the new government has spent most of its energy quarrelling, thereby creating political divisions. Before the election they were united against a common enemy, but having won the election they lost their energy, vision and common purpose. Although the government that came to power in 1998 was democratic and much different from its predecessors, it simply did not act on the colossal task it faced after the end of illiberal democracy. From these lessons one learns that the task is to assure in the future that no political party can bring back illiberal political practice as experienced before 1998.

If the end of illiberal democracy is comparable to a revolutionary situation then it follows that a revolutionary situation requires revolutionary action.²⁸⁶ What must be prevented is the maintenance of any continuity of the previous regime's policies, and those who broke the law or undermined the rule of law should be brought to justice. It is not enough simply to administer a liberal democratic political structure. Those politicians and civil servants who breached the rule of law and committed criminal acts during the rule of previous governments must be prosecuted. Otherwise, those illiberal democrats that have been defeated, after the initial shock, may grasp the opportunity to criticize and undermine the new liberal democratic government. Weak and inactive new governments are open to the damage that might be visited upon both the regime and the society. Furthermore, if the old culprits are not punished accordingly, the blame for this damage will be laid on the shoulders of the new government. And those who cause it will be the first to blame the new leadership.

²⁸⁶ By "revolutionary situation" we mean a major political overhaul of the structure of political governance as defined in Chapter I (section 4).

The inability to act in the revolutionary political situation after the defeat of illiberal democracy in Slovakia following the 1998 general election, has been a decisive general lesson for other post-communist, or any other societies, that manage to defeat illiberal democracy. What the democratic politicians did not or could not fight for, and received on a golden platter as a result of the 1998 elections, as was argued in chapter VI, could endanger their future position and slow the momentum in society that had brought down the illiberal democracy. It should also be noted that while they obtained their position easily, they might just lose it easily. If this is to be avoided, action must be swift, decisive and continuous.

In Slovakia, the result of the post 1998 government's inaction is not likely to end with the return of illiberal democracy. This is thanks to the maturity and experience of the general public, which demonstrated these qualities before 1998 elections. In fact, it seems that the process started in 1998 is not reversible – at least not to the extent that illiberal democracy could return to Slovakia. However, failure to punish the main culprits of the Mečiar's government may result in great disillusionment, and such disillusionment could worsen economic conditions or damage social cohesion. Still, the momentous change that Slovakia experienced in 1998 is a sign of positive development, and the lack of action after 1998 should be only a temporary setback.

To conclude, it seems in retrospect that the political ordeal which Slovaks experienced during the years following the break-up of Czechoslovakia, has been a worthwhile, if painful and costly experience. Suffice it to say, the decisive factor of a societal shift in Slovakia came with the awareness of responsibility among the majority of the population that they were the masters of their own fate and future. However, it is

a paradox that such awareness became possible only after the populists and nationalists dragged Slovakia away from a community of democratic nations and close to the brink of becoming an authoritarian regime. Resulting long but peaceful struggle transformed Slovak society, culminating with the 1998 elections and the overthrow of the Mečiar regime. The resurgence of civil society, and the defiance of government action, especially during the period of 1997-1998, is a remarkable story, a key moment in Slovak history. It was, however, a high price to pay for the realization that the problems tormenting Slovakia were of an internal nature, and could only be resolved through a slow and peaceful process of economic hardship and social insecurity.

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Appendix:

Results of the elections and the number of seats (out of 150) in Parliament of Slovakia in 1990, 1992, 1994 and 1998 elections:

(Sources: Global Report on Slovakia 1995 p. 11; Slovensko 1998-1999 p.45)

Political Party (coalition)	Elections'90	Elections'92	Elections'94	Elections'98
PAV (VPN)	48 (29,34%)	—	—	—
CDM (KDH)	31 (19,20%)	18 (8,88%)	17 (10,08%)	—
SNP (SNS)	22 (13,94)	15 (7,92%)	9 (5,40%)	14 (9,07%)
PDL (SDL)	22 (13,34%)	29 (14,70%)	—*	23 (14,66%)
CC (SV)	—	—	18 (10,41%)	—
HC (MK)	14 (8,66%)	14 (7,42%)	17 (10,18%)	15 (9,12%)
DP (DS)	7 (4,39%)	—	—	—
GP (SZ)	6 (3,48%)	—	—	—
MDS (HZDS)	—	74 (37,26%)	61 (34,96%)	43 (27,00%)
DU (DÚ)	—	—	15 (8,57%)	—
AWS (ZRS)	—	—	13 (7,34%)	—
SDC (SDK)	—	—	—	42 (26,33%)
PCU (SOP)	—	—	—	13 (8,01%)

* CC – Common Choice (Spoločná voľba) was a coalition with dominant PDL of leftist parties that merged for the 1994 election.

Acronyms of Political Parties during the 1990-1998 period:

- AWS** – Association of Workers of Slovakia
(Združenie robotníkov na Slovensku – ZRS)
- CDM** – Christian Democratic Movement
(Kresťansko demokratické hnutie – KDH)
- DU** – Democratic Union (Demokratická únia – DÚ)
- DP** – Democratic Party (Demokratická strana – DS)
- HC** – Hungarian Coalition (Maďarská koalícia – MK)
- MDS** – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
(Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko – HZDS)
- PAV** – Public Against Violence (in Slovak Verejnosc' proti násiliu – VPN)
- PCU** – Party of Civil Understanding
(Strana občianskeho porozumenia – SOP)
- PDL** – Party of the Democratic Left (Strana demokratickej ľavice – SDL')
- SDC** – Slovak Democratic Coalition
(Slovenská demokratická koalícia – SDK)
- SNP** – Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana – SNS)