

Break up of Czechoslovakia: roots, 1989, and consequences

Jiri BLAZEK

Universitat Charles, Praga

I. Introduction

The key for understanding of the reasons leading towards the split of the former Czechoslovakia into two independent states can be found predominantly in the historical development. In some cases these historical roots can be traced back for centuries. Therefore, in the first part of this contribution attention will be drawn towards the most important turning-points in the history of the two nations (the Czechs and the Slovaks). The author believes that this historical approach will clarify why the often given reasons for the break-up (nationalism and politics) are at least partially misleading. In the next part, immediate causes which emerged after 1989 leading to the split will be elaborated. In final paragraphs will be presented a summary of the impacts of break-up on both new states.

II. Historical development of the former Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was created after World War I, in October 1918. Czech Lands and Slovakia had been for four centuries until 1918 a part of Austro-Hungarian state. While Czech state had a strong identity in the middle ages (it had been kingdom since 1212) and joined the Austrian state more or less voluntarily it was not the case with Slovakia which has never been a kingdom or similar unit during this milenium and has been taken by Hungarian state by force. However, even more important for future development was the fact that while Czech lands were governed from Vienna, Slovakia was run from Budapest. This administrative arrangements had caused that the Czechs and the Slovaks had lived under very different conditions and had almost no mutual relationships for about 400 years.

But even in the Czech lands which had generally much better conditions, the dominance from Austria led to suppression of Czech nation. This phenomena can be illustrated for instance by a retreat of Czech language, especially from cities. Situation in Slovakia was even worse and both nations were close to extinction at the beginning of 19th century. But in the middle of 19th century suddenly national revival gushed out in Czech Lands and was soon followed by national revival in Slovakia. Since then the Czechs were trying to obtain equal rights as Austrians and Hungarians and to regain more sovereignty from Vienna. From this point of view the WWI was a huge opportunity which was successfully used by the Czech and Slovak elite to lobby for independence of these two nations.

The willingness of the Czechs and the Slovaks to fight in colours of Austro-Hungarian empire was very low even despite the threats of severe punishment and on the contrary — desertions of Czech and Slovak soldiers to France, Russia and later also to Italy often. These soldiers and voluntary recruits from the Czech and Slovak minorities living in abroad (especially in the USA) formed Czechoslovak military bodies fighting against the Central Powers. It was especially extraordinary military achievement of the Czechoslovak Legions in Russia (where legions gained and hold the whole railway magistral connecting European part of Soviet Union with port Vladivostok on the coast of the Pacific ocean) which demonstrated that the Czechs and the Slovaks have their own elite, are able to organize themselves and are therefore mature nations. Consequently, the creation of Czechoslovakia was after intensive diplomatic offensive of Czech and Slovak leaders in abroad included on the list of conditions for peace.

However, due to the above mentioned historical development there were huge differences in the economic and social conditions between the Czech lands and Slovakia at the beginning of the common state. Those days Czechoslovakia consisted on the one hand of highly industrialized Czech lands (called a workshop of Austria with 70-80% of all industrial potential of Austro-Hungarian state) and on the other hand of backward Slovakia which industrial output contributed only by 9% to industrial production of Czechoslovakia and where the rate of illiteracy is estimated at 40%.¹ This was the reason why many Czechs with important professions (teachers, officers, doctors, civil servants) moved to Slovakia as there was lack of Slovak intelligency. Latter when own Slovak intelligency grew up they were reluctant to resign on their posts. This fact, according to other sources (e.g. Ráček, 1948) even multiplied by haughty behaviour of immigrant Czechs, has contributed to the development of tension between the two nations. However, much more important for the future relationship between Czechs and Slovaks and for building of the administrative structures of the new state has been the national composition of the new state. According to 1921 census in Czechoslovakia lived about 6.9 mil. of Czechs, 3.1 mil. of Germans, 1.9 mil. of Slovaks, about 0.7 mil. of Hungarians and 0.9 mil. of other minorities (Ruthenians, Jews, Poles etc.). But those days was enforced an idea that there is one Czechoslovak nation (consisting of two branches -Czechs and Slovaks) which has about 2/3 of population and all other minorities have only 1/3. This was the underlying reason why so called Pittsburgh agreement from May 1918 between representatives of both nations about creation of the common state promising autonomy to Slovaks was not fulfilled. This was one of the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the new state in Slovakia. The other important reason was the inability of the new Czechoslovak government to launch any program of significant economic help to Slovakia. While between the Wars there was remarkable achievement in education, the economic situation in Slovakia has even worsen due to the relocation of foreign owned companies (to Hungary and Poland) and due to the competition from more advanced Czech industry. These factors were

fueling autonomous movement in Slovakia which resulted firstly (in October 1938) to the declaration of autonomy and finally, in March 1939 (under strong support from nazist Germany), to the declaration of Slovak sovereignty under «special protection» from Germany. However, in the end of the WWII and shortly afterwards there was obvious will from both sides to re-establish the common state.

Another important turning point was 1946 when the first post war elections took place and while in the Czech Lands won the Communist party, in Slovakia it was non-communist Democratic party that gained the biggest support. However, due to the election result in more populated Czech Lands, the overall winner of the last democratic elections became the Communists party which during the next two years had systematically strengthen its power and finally took an unlimited power in communist coup in February 1948.

Communists supposed that they will resolve the national problems by closing the development gap between backward Slovakia and developed Czech Lands (Pavlínek, 1993). Huge stress was put on industrialization of backward areas also in other to increase the military strength of the communist state. Slovakia had also good strategic position close to Soviet Union from were huge amounts of raw materials were imported and was located far away from NATO countries. Therefore, many new plants of heavy industry (often with military production) were located in Slovakia. Consequently, between 1948-1960 the industrial production in Slovakia has increased more than five times! (Haufler, 1984). It is obvious that such impressive growth of Slovak industry was only made possible due to redistribution of sources created in the Czech Lands and led to relative decline and technological retardness of the Czech industry. Also standard of living was improving quite rapidly in Slovakia, e.g. in the sphere of housing, health care. Nevertheless, national and political ambitions of the Slovaks had not been met. In 1968 (soon after Soviet led invasion into Czechoslovakia), was in a National Assembly passed a law about federalization of Czechoslovakia which gave Slovaks some kind of autonomy (if we can speak about autonomy under totalitarian communists regime at all). But even this federalization has stopped on the half of the way. For example there was an asymmetry in new institutional structure. Therefore, there existed e.g. The Czechoslovak Academy of Science and The Slovak Academy of Science but not Czech Academy of Science, the same with Communist party etc. The reason was that the Czechs did not feel the need to create the Czech counterparts because they considered the federal institutions as their. This institutional asymmetry inevitably led to the over-representation of the Czechs in federal institutions and it is necessary to add that the federal level was much more important than the republic one. Also all central (=federal) institutions remained located in Prague and none was moved to Bratislava.

However, from economic point of view, the standard of living and even per capita production was almost the same in Slovakia as in Czech Lands at the end of 1980s.

III. Development after the «Velvet revolution» in 1989

«Velvet revolution» in November 1989 which brought an end of the totalitarian communist regime revealed many hidden tensions in Czechoslovak society. Among these of key importance soon proved to be the relationship between the two nations. It was clear that there must be a real autonomy for Slovakia and therefore generally weaker federation and stronger republics in the near future. But in reality the question of competence proved to be very difficult and complex. The Czechs looked on Slovak effort with kind of

suspicion or «old brother syndrome» while the Slovaks thought that the Czechs are reluctant to give them more competencies. The tension has sharply increased during the parliamentary dispute over the new official name of the state —the old one was «Czechoslovak socialist republic». The original intention was to remove word «socialist» but Slovaks used this opportunity and try to express somehow that there are two nations with equal rights. Therefore, they wanted to change the name to Czecho-Slovak republic. This was not acceptable for Czechs because of historical reasons (Czecho-Slovakia was the official name of Czechoslovakia after German occupation of border regions of Czech Lands in October 1938) and due to the fact that word «Czecho» is not commonly used for the Czech Lands. Finally, after several months of hot debates a compromise solution was achieved (Czech and Slovak Federative Republic). But meanwhile the overall tension between the two nations reached such level that for Federal parliament it was impossible to achieve an agreement on almost any issue. This situation was even worsened by political instability in Slovakia when in 1991 the government of Slovak republic was voted non-confidence by Slovak parliament.

However, despite the fact that this «hyphen» battle contributed strongly to overall tension and that this issue filled front pages of newspapers in both republics for several months there were also other and I will argue more deeper roots of political disagreements. I believe that the main reason leading to the split of the country was the different impact of economic reform in both republics and especially the different opinions over the involvement of the state into economy. While Czechs preferred predominantly liberal approach and considered the period of market economy between the World Wars as their golden age, Slovaks much more appreciated economic achievement during the communists era of state planning. When in 1991 launched economic reform including liberalization of prices, opening of economy and when subsidies to factories were significantly limited Slovak industries found themselves in a very difficult position. Slovak economy had worse sectoral structure and was more dependent on shrinking and unreliable East European market than Czech economy which kept at least limited trade with Western countries. Controversial was also the decision of federal government (intended as a sign of good will from the new Czechoslovak democratic system) to stop export and therefore to limit production of heavy weapons by which measure was more affected Slovak industry. Another example of different adaptability of Czech and Slovak economies was the growth of private sector. Only in 1991 in Czech republic was in the private sector created almost 10 times more jobs than in Slovakia (Pavlínek, 1993). All these factors and some others (like softer conditions for provision of unemployment benefits in Slovakia or different demographic structure) led towards much higher unemployment in Slovakia than in the Czech republic (12:3%). Nevertheless, Slovak politicians and economists insisted that Slovakia would be better off if it was an independent country («Switzerland of the East»). On the other hand, many Czechs started to believe that without Slovak «burden» they could proceed more quickly in economic reform.

In 1992, new parliamentary elections took place and in Slovakia the question of sovereignty or even independence was a crucial issue during election campaign. In Slovakia the biggest support gained leftist political parties while in Czech republic right wing parties won the elections (it is interesting to recall that in the last previous democratic elections in 1946 it was just the opposite). Electoral winner in Slovakia became party headed by controversial Vladimír Mečiar who wanted con-federation, i.e. federation of two independents republics when the only common competence would be the army and currency (not economic or foreign policy, e.g. they wanted to have their own seat in EU; on the

after-elections negotiations V. Meciar refused to enter federal government and insisted on being prime minister of the Slovak government). This approach was unacceptable for the Czech side (represented by electoral winner Václav Klaus) and so relatively quickly an agreement about the split of state was achieved. It is just to say that while it was the Slovaks who wanted all competence to achieve their sovereignty it was the Czech side who was better prepared for the split of the country. This political development rapidly leading towards the split of Czechoslovakia was surprising even for the top politicians as can be seen from the fact that leaders of all political parties stood for a seat in Federal Parliament which was abolished only six months after elections due to the split of state and not to republic parliaments. Nevertheless, the break-up of Czechoslovakia was done in a constitutional way according to the laws approved by Federal parliament. However, some problems connected with the division of property among these two states were not solved yet, e.g. division of assets of Czechoslovak Central Bank (more loans went to Slovak firms). Generally, the key for division of property was territorial principle which was slightly advantageous for Czech republic.

IV. The impacts of the break-up on both new states

The division of state was time - consuming, costly and sometimes painful process. Both republics lost at least a year in unproductive disputes while pressing problems in all spheres (economy, legislation etc.) remained unsolved. According to OECD study (OECD, 1994) the costs of the split can be divided into three main categories: 1) costs caused by the contentions; 2) costs connected with adaptation on the new institutional arrangements; 3) new running costs of this institutional arrangements (*own translation*). As a example of some of these new costs can be listed e.g. expenditures on custom offices on border crossings, protection of borders, foreign embassies, creation of own currency etc.

In addition, especially older people had quite strong identity with former Czechoslovakia. Also people living closer to border feel many disadvantages, there are even cases of villages split by the border in two halves leaving shops and services on the territory of the other state (agreement on solution to these problems is still being prepared). Also the size of markets for firms from both republics has diminished and the volume of mutual trade dropped due to the transaction costs and other factors significantly. By these economic problems are affected especially food industry firms from eastern part of Czech republic - Moravia. This resulted in further drop in GDP in the first quarter of 1993 in both states. Fortunately, situation soon clarify and mutual trade increased again but still remained lower than in a common state.

However, there must obviously be also some positive effects on both sides. While in Slovakia we should find positive effects mainly in the non-material sphere, e.g. in increased national pride in the first independent Slovak state (however, see the very last paragraph) and negative effects esp. in the sphere of economy, in the Czech republic it is roughly vice versa. Czech republic is now smaller and we lost part of «our» state (just remember before mentioned asymmetry in federal institutions, so all institutions should be renamed or even created which was done quite slowly and reluctantly. For example Czechoslovak Airlines are to be renamed to Czech Airlines in March 1995 or even the official names of 2 important political parties still include word «Czechoslovak»). On the other hand in the sphere of economy there are some immediate advantages for Czech side. First of all the Czech economy is no more subsidizing Slovak economy (the former money transfer

is according to OECD (1994) roughly estimated to 0,7 - 1.0 bil. of crowns annually), and while Czech republic is achieving surplus in state budget, Slovak budget fell into deficit and it is interesting to note that the size of Slovak deficit in 1993 was approximately of the size of Czech subsidy to Slovakia. Secondly, due to bigger economic problems and different perception of market economy and of state involvement into economy by the Slovaks, their politicians wanted to slow-down the pace of economic reform (esp. privatization) which would have led inevitably towards higher losses. Also political instability in Slovakia has now much smaller impacts on Czech republic than it would be in a common state. Also Czech republic has «moved» westwards in a geopolitical sense.

Finally, many people esp. in Slovakia felt and maybe even now feel having been deceived by the split of state because referendum was not held on such an important issue. Opinion pools were consistently showing that only minority of Czechs and even minority of Slovaks wanted the break up. Referendum was refused at least at the Czech republic due to the fact that it was impossible to create a clear question which answer would have been binding for politicians. The point was that both majority of Czechs and Slovaks wanted a common state but very different one as was shown by the results in parliamentary elections. In this context it is important to quote a well known Czech journalist Ota Cerný who as a reporter took part in all post-elections negotiations: «This country was not divided by two political parties and by two politicians. This country was divided... by voters» (Bubílková et al, 1994).

Slovak prime minister V. Meciar has even promised holding referendum before the split of the country but even he recognized that no-yes answer in referendum cannot help to solve such complex problem. Nevertheless, many Czechs and Slovaks suspect him from deliberate creation of such situation in order to gain unlimited power. This was latter indirectly confirmed by the way he was handling affairs in Slovakia which led twice to voting non-confidence to him by Slovak parliament.

According to latest opinion pools (Svora, 1995) held in both Czech and Slovak republics 19,6% of the Czechs and 21.7% of the Slovaks claim that they wanted the division of the former Czechoslovakia. However, only 10.7% of the Slovaks which were originally against the split of the country consider now the break-up as a right decision, while the number for the Czechs is 30.4%! The share of persons which were against the split but have already reconciled with the break-up is about one third in both countries. Consequently, on the contrary to expectations it is now the Czech side which is more satisfied with the split while majority of Slovaks feel unhappy with the new Slovak state. Therefore, if there is any winner of the split at all it is certainly not Slovakia.

Note

¹ In order not to disturb the stream of reasoning even the important facts should have been omitted. For instance, Ruthenia with area of 13.000 km² had also been until 1939 part of Czechoslovakia.

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