

# POLICY PAPER

## The Velvet Divorce: Dissolution of Czechoslovakia as an inspiration for the Western Balkans

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- The example of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, referred to also as the “Velvet Divorce”, in the early 1990s, often serves as a model of peaceful dissolution of a joint state.
- While the context of the joint Czechoslovak state and its split as well as the shared history of Czechs and Slovaks is very different from that of the Western Balkan countries, due to its peaceful, well-managed preparation as well as the implementation and establishment of “above-standard” friendly relations after the dissolution, for which is Czechoslovakia studied as a model example and compared to other states’ dissolutions, it would be impossible not to include it among the cases studied in this project.



It is a general feeling in the Czech Republic and Slovakia that the current relations are better than they were in the times of the joint state, although according to the recent polls most Czechs and Slovaks believe the relations have not changed much.<sup>1</sup> Both countries refer to each other as the closest ally and a natural partner. The visits between the Czech and Slovak representatives are very frequent and friendly (for example, as a matter of tradition, the first foreign visit by newly elected presidents of both countries heads to Czech Republic or Slovakia respectively).

However, the context of this breakup and the issues and developments leading up to it usually remain left aside. While nowadays there is an apparent lack of conflicting issues among Czechs and Slovaks, life in the shared state was far from ideal and the burden of history played its role as well. Czechoslovakia was born after World War I with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, both a product of Czechs and Slovaks breaking free from their former rulers and a way to gain more international strength and recognition compared to individual, smaller states. After the Munich agreement and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia the joint state suffered the first crisis as the Czech part of the state turned into an occupied territory while a collaborationist regime was established in Slovakia (the "Slovak State"). After World War II and defeat of the Nazi and fascist regimes in Europe, Czechoslovakia was re-established, this time under a communist regime controlled by the Soviet Union.

Grievances existed even within the first Czechoslovak state – Slovaks blamed the Czechs for lack of interest in Slovakia, the concentration of crucial industries in the Czech lands and feeling of exclusion from decision-making happening in Prague. On the other hand, in the Czech part of the state, some viewed Slovakia as the weaker part that needs to be helped and that halts their economic progress. While the Nazi occupation represented for Slovaks a unique chance for having and governing their own national state for the first time in history, from the Czech side the

establishment of the Slovak State was perceived as opportunism without any solidarity with the Czech brothers.

In the second joint state between Czechs and Slovaks, these mutual grievances were mostly muted by the strict communist rule controlled from Moscow. Only after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and the establishment of democratic government, the mutual differences and contradicting visions between Czechs and Slovaks showed, supported strongly by the personalities and worldviews of the new political elites on both sides. For Slovaks, the fall of communism created an opportunity for national emancipation and increased demand for having a larger say about their own issues and their future. On the other hand, the Czechs desired a joint Czechoslovak state, consolidated on the inside and united on the outside.

The first crisis emerged when the question of a name change was opened, removing the word "socialist" from the official state name, creating the Czechoslovak Republic. Slovaks saw this as an opportunity to pursue another change – inserting a hyphen in the word Czechoslovak (i.e. Czecho-Slovak Republic), returning thus to the first republic name in 1918 to 1920, stressing the federative nature of the state and equality between both entities. While this might seem as a minor issue, for Czechs and Slovaks this disagreement created a very serious discussion resulting in a several months lasting crisis. The following solution was offered by the Czechoslovak Parliament: the word Federative was added into the name (i.e. Czechoslovak Federative Republic) and the name was spelled without a hyphen in Czech and with it in Slovak. Eventually, this solution proved to be unacceptable to Slovak political elites as well and the final name was decided to be the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, stressing even more explicitly the equality between Czechs and Slovaks.

These divergent visions became even clearer after the general elections of 1992. In Czech Republic, it was won by Civic Democratic Party (ODS) led by Václav Klaus, whilst in Slovakia the nationalist Movement for Democratic Slovakia

<sup>1</sup> Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, "Tisková zpráva: Rozdělení Československa: 25 let od vzniku samostatné ČR a SR",

[https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a4464/f9/po171205.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4464/f9/po171205.pdf), [30 October 2019].

(HZDS) was the most successful party, led by Vladimír Mečiar. Both of them became the prime ministers in their respective national governments. And while the former advocated for rapid privatisation and overall economic transformation while preserving the federative state model, the latter wanted significantly slower economic transformation with state intervention and called for a confederative model. HZDS pursued an irreconcilable model of Slovak sovereignty and legal personality while remaining in one state with Czechs. Czechs on the other hand envisioned a federation with a strong federal government.

## Best practices and lessons learned

In the rather positive experience of the dissolution of the Czechoslovak state, free from any violence, several factors underpinning the relatively calm process can be identified despite the eventual outcome depending on many other characteristics of the whole situation and its comparability with other cases, such as the dissolution of Yugoslavia, is limited. Regardless, some important conclusions can be made from the Czechoslovak experience.

### Political decision without a referendum

The paradox is that although voting very differently, the majority of both Czechs and Slovaks wished to stay in a unified state.<sup>2</sup> The dissolution agreed by elected leaders can be understood as an unintended consequence then. The Czechs and Slovaks had very different ideas about the nature of economic and political transformation of the state and the future establishment of relations within

Czechoslovakia which were not compatible enough to be realized in one state unit.

From the fast agreement between prime ministers Klaus and Mečiar and the direction the separate countries headed then under their leadership, it seems that their own personalities and motivations contributed to the end of Czechoslovakia. Both men had a strong vision of their country's future (divergent from each other) and apparently understood that in a united Czechoslovakia, each of them has less political power to pursue this vision. But neither one of them openly called for the split at first and until this day, both say it was the other side pushing for separation.

As mentioned above, the opinion polls conducted at that time showed that majority of citizens in both parts of Czechoslovakia did not wish for the dissolution. The political elites were aware of this situation and thus avoided holding a referendum despite general demand for it (over 1 million Czechoslovaks signed a petition calling for a referendum<sup>3</sup>). Due to the absence of opportunity for the citizens to have a say in the decision of Czechoslovakia's future, this decision is sometimes criticized as illegitimate. However, the response of the leaders' standing behind it was that the citizens showed their preferences through the elections which brought Klaus and Mečiar to power and thus no referendum was needed. From later interviews with Klaus it is clear that they were worried the referendum's results would not support the breakup in at least one part of the federation and would thus complicate this problem even further.

The Slovak political scene was more divided on the topic, though. Except for the not very significant Movement for Czechoslovak Understanding, all of the subjects wanted at least a federation. Public Against Violence (VPN) that had overwhelmingly won the Slovak 1990 general elections

<sup>2</sup> Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, Sociologický ústav AV ČR, „Občané k rozdělení Československa před 10 lety“, [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a239/f9/100151s\\_PO21227.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a239/f9/100151s_PO21227.pdf), [30 October 2019] and Rozpad ČSFR: Většina lidí si ho nepřála, *Magazín M*, <https://www.em.muni.cz/tema/3272-rozpad-csfr-vetsina-lidi-si-ho-neprala>, [30 October 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Engelberg S., Czechoslovakia Breaks in Two, To Wide Regret, *The New York Times*,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/01/world/czechoslovakia-breaks-in-two-to-wide-regret.html?pagewanted=all> [30 October 2019] and Patočka, J., Changing our country's name to Czechia won't solve the problems we face, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/18/czechia-a-name-change-czech-republic-problems-people-government>, [30 October 2019].

called for a “partnership federation”. Further away was Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) with its leader Ján Čarnogurský that served as a Slovak Prime Minister from 1991 to 1992, wanting a somewhat looser-than-a-federation model and according to his words “a star on the EU flag for Slovakia”.<sup>4</sup> HZDS called for a confederation and with no surprise, the Slovak National Party (SNS) demanded full independence. This clearly shows that even inside one of the nations, the opinions on the future of Czechoslovakia were divided.

On the other hand, on the Czech side the political elites, apart from the Prime Minister, were much more convinced of preserving the federation with strong sentiments towards Czechoslovakia, resulting in Václav Havel’s resignation from the post of Czechoslovak President when the agreement on dissolution was reached between the two prime ministers. Also other political parties wanted to preserve the federation, although they differed in the degree to which they were willing to give in to Slovak demands, and Václav Klaus was often criticised by them for sealing the fate of the joint state. In general, it can be said that Czechs identified much more with the Czechoslovak state than Slovaks and the 1918 establishment of independent Czechoslovakia has a more significant and sentimental place in their history.

### Well-managed technical division perceived as acceptable by both sides

An important factor contributing to the overall good mutual relations between the two new states after the division was the nature of the technical division itself. Although at the beginning the Czech and Slovak side had different preferences in the formula according to which the Czechoslovak property was to be divided, eventually the negotiations were concluded with an agreement on the 2:1

division among Czechs and Slovaks according to the population and territory size.<sup>5</sup>

Another factor helping the smooth division was the relatively high homogeneity of the population in both parts of the federation, further supported by the signing of a number of agreements, including those enabling free movement of people and trade. All these factors made it easier for the populations to adapt to the new circumstances and hindered reasons for resistance from citizens.

Altogether, some 30 treaties were signed before the dissolution that were to govern future relation between two states. Both governments agreed on the creation of customs union which allowed duty-free exchange of goods and services, and on free movement of people. They also adopted common trade policies and tariffs, agreed on free movement of people and signed more treaties dealing with tax reforms, common borders, defence and even a short-lived monetary union.

There were also no issues with the border demarcation as Czechoslovakia had already been a federation and the borders had been clearly set. The number of agreements and good preparation of the dissolution itself, establishing the relations between the future separate states as very close regardless the division, set a solid base for friendly relations and acceptance of the division by all parts of the society.

What is, however, most important, is that the form of this technical division was perceived as legitimate and as a compromise by both sides, not leaving space for any deeper grievances and revisionism. The division was also seen as beneficial for both states. Especially in Slovakia, the division meant real independence for the first time in its history, giving Slovaks a chance to decide about their lives themselves. On the Czech side, the division met with more sentiment and nostalgia, both from the population and

<sup>4</sup> “Rozhovor prezidenta republiky o rozdělení Československa v knize „Jak praskaly švy”,“ <https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/2986>, [30 October 2019].

<sup>5</sup> Česko-slovenský rozvod. Spory o majetek trvaly sedm let, porcovaly se vlaky i letadla, *Český rozhlas*,

<https://radiozurnal.rozhlas.cz/cesko-slovensky-rozvod-spory-o-majetek-trvaly-sedm-let-porcovaly-se-vlaky-i-7183253>, [30 October 2019].

political elites. However, for the governing party and especially Prime Minister Klaus it was eventually beneficial, giving him the autonomy needed for implementation of rapid economic transformation which was his personal goal he put high importance on.

### Mutual respect and constructive public discourse

When analysing the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the factors which contributed to its peacefulness, the rhetoric and discourse spread by political elites regarding the split and the other part of federation cannot be overlooked. During negotiations between the Prime Ministers Klaus and Mečiar, both during the dissolution process and after the division, the relations between Czechs and Slovaks remained calm and rather amicable. Both Prime Ministers spoke about each other with respect and neither they nor the rest of the political elites in either country tried to drive a wedge between or spread hatred among Czechs and Slovaks.

This very pragmatic and constructive approach to the dissolution by the political elites, without igniting negative sentiments towards the other nation among the general public, played well into the already overall good, despite above-mentioned issues and disagreements, mutual relations between Czechs and Slovaks. The responsible and constructive discourse created by politicians is something notable and rare when compared especially to the situation in former Yugoslavia or even Western Balkans nowadays. Instead of igniting the potential nationalist sentiments and grievances (existing especially among Slovaks) or the feelings of betrayal from their federation partner, present to some extent among Czechs, the leaders of Czechoslovakia chose the other way.

### Conclusions and lessons for the Western Balkans

Several conclusions can be drawn from studying the case of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Firstly, the dissolution process showed that whether a state survives as

one entity or breaks down mainly depends on the political elites, not the masses. One can pinpoint specific decisions done by political elites that irreversibly stirred the dissolution process. One of them was even to leave out the public and omit referendum. The role of political elites and their influence over the general public through the discourse they create is also important, as they can either mitigate the existing potential for interethnic tensions or, on the other hand, further enhance it and exploit it for their own gains. Not only in the time period leading up to dissolution of Czechoslovakia and during the breakup but also the developments of mutual relations later on showed that despite the large portion of shared history and geographical, historical, cultural and ideological closeness, the relations between the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been significantly dependent on the political leadership at that time. While under the government led by Klaus in the 1990s, there was a strong tendency to break away not only from Slovakia but also the rest of the Visegrad countries, and to be the frontrunner in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. On the other hand, the government led by Miloš Zeman who became the Prime Minister in 1998, showed much more solidarity to Slovakia and the support from the Czech Republic, as well as renewed Visegrad cooperation, contributed to Slovakia being able to catch up with its partners and join the EU together with them in 2004.

Second lesson to be considered is the high importance of the role of political institutions when dealing with the possible dissolution of a state along the ethnic lines. It is because these can either exacerbate or ameliorate the issue, depending on their quality. Well-built democratic institutions have the potential to provide the best tools to contain ethnic tensions. Unlike in undemocratic regimes dominated by one ethnic group, democracy and strong functioning democratic institutions, when set up keeping in mind the existing ethnic divisions and the necessity of their overcoming, can offer every ethnic group proper representation, adequate inclusion in decision making and a sense of an equal status with other groups. When all ethnic groups feel their participation in a democratic process is important and that they have a say in the matters relevant to them, the grounds for feelings of resentment towards other ethnic groups are reduced. This can be done by



building robust, impartial and just democratic institutions that support real inclusion and cooperation instead of divisions and separation.

On the other hand, when the institutions are not so well-built or are weak, they easily allow for the ethnic tensions to grow. At the same time, the flawed federation set up from 1968 showed that while too much centralisation is not desirable in democratic federations, a federation model with unclear division of powers and strong republican governments is not feasible either, especially in a newly democratic state.

In terms of establishing good mutual relations and mitigating nationalist tensions, political elites from both entities and their approach towards each other, as well as the public discourse they create, is of key importance. When politicians from both sides speak about each other and the other nation with at least basic respect and understanding, it has a mitigating effect on the existing potential for interethnic tensions. Even in the case of Czechoslovakia, the mutual grievances could have been easily exploited by opportunistic politicians (and to some extent they were by Mečiar with the Slovak sovereignty concept prior to 1992 elections), stirring up the interethnic tensions. In these situations, however, responsible political leadership that pursues mutually accepted and peaceful solutions and a continuous constructive dialog is necessary. This is a very important lesson especially for the Western Balkans where up to now most of political leaders act rather in an irresponsible way, using the existing resentment in the society for their own political gains instead of showing real effort to overcome the existing tensions and divisions.

From the case of Czechoslovakia, regardless of its specific circumstances, the conclusion can be drawn that open, frequent and respectful communication in combination with a responsible political leadership that keeps its country's long-term best interests at heart, rather than only short-term political wins, create good conditions for settling disputes and mutual tensions. This applies not only to malfunctioning federations but also to Western Balkan states and their mutual regional cooperation. In case of existing bilateral disputes, a lasting mutually accepted solution must be pursued through open, intense and

respectful communication between both sides, instead of short-term political gains.

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