

## **THE BREAK-UP OF CZECHOSLAVAKIA**

*Petr Pithart*

### **SEPARATIST TENDENCIES IN THE POST-COMMUNIST WORLD**

After Communism we find ourselves amid accumulated problems, and at the same time beset by lack of public awareness of just how serious and interconnected these are.

There is insufficient consciousness of how, under the surface of apparently homogeneous and controlled social cultures, different national groups and identities have been lying in a kind of frozen state. They have been pushed to the back of society's general consciousness. Hence when they awake it tends to be in deformed shapes and novel or unexpected combinations.

This awakening is also affected by the economic transformation - initial disappointments, a slower pace than expected, with much greater difficulties and sacrifices. Under such circumstances somebody has to be blamed and images of 'the Enemy' assume growing importance.

People adapt to life with this Enemy in a world of 'Us and Them'. They fail to resist easy generalisations and don't seek out more differentiated views. Having been 'freed overnight' the media are subjected to the new free-market pressures and encourage them in such responses.

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There is also a tendency towards fragmentation at all levels of society. People want to be more separate, to work for themselves alone, and see the enemy in any kind of central authority. Closely related to this is an atrophy of the sense of solidarity, of those forms of social help which, after all, usually benefit the helper too. There is unwillingness to think in other terms than immediate advantage or disadvantage. This is particularly significant among the stronger and better-off - which brings me to the Czech side of the Czechoslovakian issue.

### **UNIQUE ASPECTS**

Fifty years spent in a non-democratic environment had caused mutual ignorance of one another between Czechs and Slovaks. This helped sustain and exaggerate illusions and prejudices on both sides.

The creation of the Czech-Slovak Federal system was not in fact wholly due to the Soviet occupation of August 1968. None the less it bore the marks of that period upon it. Hence on the Czech side it was never accepted as a step towards democratizing the whole country. It was in reality more like a two-member union of governments - federation in the strict sense is impossible where there are only two parties and no way of voting to resolve differences. Negotiations then easily deteriorate into struggles, and the exploitation of one side by the other.

The constitutional means for resolving conflicts were inadequate. Under the post-1968 Parliamentary constitution each nation was excessively protected from the laws of the other. But this Federal system presupposed under it the existence of two separate constitutions which in truth did not exist. Such constitutional and political inequality was reflected also in structure of the state and party organs (the KSC or Czech Communist Party and the KSS or Slovak Party), so that there was no way of starting again from scratch. In this situation where natural inequalities were being artificially aggravated, every change produced further unpredictable consequences.

The separate development of the Czech and Slovak Republics in the twenty years up to 1989 is evaluated differently in the two countries. The era of so-called 'Normalization' brought some gains to Slovakia as well as losses, which in turn affected attitudes towards the past regime, both then and now.

When the split took place, judged by 'objective' indicators like industrialization, degree of urban development, and so on, the differences

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between the two countries appeared to be at their smallest. This was largely due to mechanisms of redistribution which favoured Slovakia. Yet, surprisingly or not, subjective assessments of the mutual relationship seem to have been unaffected. In certain specific situations even small objective differences can play a decisive role, and it matters little whether they are growing or diminishing.

The Czech situation is a heavily centralized one (which from the Slovakian point of view meant unifying, or assimilating). The Czech Kingdom (or Western part of the Czech Republic) is characterized by very minor natural and regional divisions, and the overwhelmingly dominant role of Prague as its capital. Unlike the Moravian Margrave and Slovakia, it also had stable borders for most of its history. Neither good nor bad in itself, this fact was never perceived as a fault by the Czechs. But it was and is felt by the Slovaks - and now to some extent by the Moravians - as 'Pragocentrism', a manifestation of the city's arrogant dominance.

The relationship between Czechs and Slovaks was not hostile. From the point of view of the split, paradoxically, those in the Czech-Slovak border regions seem to have had the closest ties. Slovak animosity usually singled out Prague, often without distinguishing between Czech or Slovak officials - i.e. it was opposition to federalism as such. Czech counter-hostility was not so strong; but it always picked on the Slovaks as such.

### **THE MISTAKES OF THE UNIONISTS**

The Czechs grossly underestimated what one must call the symbolic needs of Slovakia. Benevolent attitudes, tolerance and patronising advice do not placate the other side but make it more radical. They are seen as proof that a united state is not being taken seriously, and that paternalism still prevails.

In any relationship of two countries within a single state, one is bound to be stronger than the other. The implications and demands of this situation are quite clear, and must be respected by the stronger partner and openly discussed by both. If (that is) the stronger partner is interested in preserving a united polity. Pretending that the two sides are really equal or independent is a form of hypocrisy. At best it fails to persuade; at worst it strengthens suspicions that the more powerful partner desires the split to be initiated by the weaker. The Czech side played this 'objectively' hypocritical rôle. It was divided between those who wanted to preserve the common state because of

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a 'guilty conscience' towards the Slovaks, and those who actually wanted the split and nurtured the Slovak separatists.

On the Czech side too, legal perfectionism was a temptation both for those who wanted the split and those against it. The former argued (e.g.) that it was not legally possible to ratify the existing Federation by a 'state treaty', as the Slovaks demanded. But those opposed to break-up were also afraid that the foundations of the state might not be sound if its formal, legal aspects were not absolutely right. In point of fact, the 'state treaty' was more a symbolic action than a strictly constitutional one - the will for 'a new beginning in finally free conditions'.

The strategy for economic transition was tailored to suit the Czech lands. Slovakia was supposed to profit at second hand, indirectly, from the more dynamic expansion planned for Bohemia and Moravia - again therefore relying upon the old mechanisms of internal subdivision. To have done otherwise would have meant slowing down the changes in the Czech countries, and moderating their impact. And the Czech political representatives were unwilling to contemplate this option.

### **POSSIBLE SIMILARITIES AND LESSONS**

The end of the polarised, East-West world brings about lessened cohesion in both national and international relationships. Solidarity and good will are also weakened. Also, the processes of political and economic integration or modernization give rise to unexpected and unwanted pressures, if the extent and speed of the reforms are incorrectly gauged. The speed factor is especially important in generating counter pressures, since it can never be the same or right in all situations. Most likely cultural processes of modernisation also provoke counter pressures, but these are more difficult to observe and verify than on the institutional level. However, in natural systems the diversification of species is a necessary basis for stability. It seems at least probable the same thing is true for human societies.

Nationalism is not the only, and probably is not now even the strongest motive for separation and disintegration. What one might call 'egoistic regionalism' leads in the same direction. Particularism can assume various forms which should not be reduced to one. 'Being different' will always find a justification if the interests behind it are strong enough. Maybe the decisive fact is less a growth in motifs of divergence, than a weakening of motifs of convergence - related, perhaps, to the end of the politically bi-polar world?

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The diverging forces define themselves rather loosely and incoherently; they often do not feel the need to persuade at all costs those not already on their side.

In this context it may be that Federation, as a mechanism for the redistribution of resources, power and justice, has outlived its usefulness. It requires good will towards redistribution in order to be an effective tool or technique of solidarity, which may in turn demand a more homogeneous environment than previously. Heterogeneous conditions undermine it.

We are witnessing an unprecedented division of economic from political priorities. It is as if economic interests can free themselves and behave irresponsibly with greater ease. This is especially the case with 'stronger partners'; weaker partners may prefer to construct and follow political goals, but the superficial nature of these is often revealed - they are like the symbols I mentioned earlier. The division of what used to be mutually connected motives, economic and political, leads to a loss of perspective in both space and time. It brings about the ascendancy of short-term solutions over long-term interests.

### **CONSEQUENCES OF SEPARATION**

After the break-up of Czechoslovakia relationships between the two countries will deteriorate, because those who have contributed to the division (whether politicians or the general public) will tend to justify their controversial actions in retrospect. These justifications will provoke negative responses from the other side. Such unkind or provocative gestures will thus ensure that, sooner or later, even those who entertained doubts about the split will become sufficiently sure that it was inevitable. This is 'retrospective legitimation'.

Policy short-termism and self-interest take over, and such 'particularism' does not lend itself to adequate thought about the geo-political consequences of the division, or to the formulation of adequate long-term policies for coping with its effects.

As for the illusion that only after the split will there exist the proper conditions for more spontaneous relationships founded on a new, healthier basis for future negotiations - by way of conclusion I must say simply that this is an illusion.

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