

WAS THE DISSOLUTION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA INEVITABLE?

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The most frequent arguments used to rationalise the unintended consequence of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia - the 1989 Velvet Revolution - became crucial elements in the political discourse in both its former territories. In general, one can identify three types of argument: 'economic', 'elitist', and 'metaphysical'. These may be summarized briefly in the following propositions.

- The economic differences between the Czech lands and Slovakia are so significant that the two economies are incompatible.
- The post-revolutionary political elite has failed and is responsible for the split of the state in two parts.
- The process of national emancipation is one of 'historical necessity'. Each nation must naturally evolve into its 'own national statehood'.

As a part of political discourse these perspectives are naturally biased and limited. Though there is some truth in the first two, the problem is a more complex one and cannot be reduced to one or the other. A multifactorial approach is necessary, and a cultural perspective has to be included in order to understand also the role of Czech and Slovak populations and their attitudes in that historic event.

IMITATION

The last of the above mentioned perspectives, the 'metaphysical', I consider as the most ideological one of all three. However, the Slovak search for

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national identity has been the most frequently used to explain the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Federal Republic (CSFR). It is therefore worth scrutinising this argument more closely in order to find out what has actually happened under the label of 'the search for national identity'.

I argue that there is no empirical and historical evidence for such an 'objective law'. Instead we can observe the phenomenon of imitation which is a strong factor in the present processes of disintegration resulting in the fragmentation of Eastern Europe which produces new sources of conflicts.

The leaders of nationalist movements in Slovakia had used the example of the national upheavals in other countries - the Baltic states and Slovenia were often invoked as the heroic nations that should be followed - as the mobilizing argument for their own political objectives, deliberately neglecting substantial differences between the countries. Thus, constructing a 'natural tendency' toward national independence in the form of a separate state became a significant factor in the mobilization of political nationalism in East European countries. That is part of nationalist ideology, just as the 'historical tendency' toward the classless society had been a part of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Nationalist slogans of the type 'All nations in Europe are independent and only the Slovaks still suffer under the domination of the Czechs' were effective in strengthening irrational nationalist argument. The more people are disoriented, and this is the case in transitions, the more they are subject to the so-called law of imitation.

ANTI-LIBERAL REVOLUTION

The most unfortunate legacy of the communist regime is to be found at a deeper level of social reality, a level of cultural code that may be identified as the poor legal and political culture. This opens the door for national demagogy and consequently for political manipulation. The Czecho-Slovak mass media had become an important factor in the manipulation of public opinion. We live in a time when both revolutions and 'nationalist counter-revolutions' are conducted through mass media. The majority of the staff of the Slovak mass media had collaborated intensively with the communist regime and many of them even with the former security police; so there were not many adherents of the new regime amongst journalists and the staff of the mass media. The newly acquired freedom of the press was often understood and used as freedom to be against the newly born regime, the first non-communist governing elite (after 1948) and the coalition parties supported democracy, free market and the federal arrangement of Czecho-Slovakia. Hence, to be against meant to be anti-democratic, anti-reform and for a more-

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or-less sovereign and independent Slovakia. Criticism of the so-called Klaus economic policy was the most unrestrained and in its substance non-professional and demagogic. Separation as such did not appeal to the majority of the Slovaks but they did object to the radical economic reforms.

In some East European countries secessionist struggles by ethno-nations against the state to form themselves into sovereign nations-states in their own right also constituted libertarian struggles against the anti-democratic and neo-communist power centre of the state. This has been the case in the Baltics, Slovenia and, in part, Croatia. As we have observed recently, even in those countries the achievement of sovereign statehood per se does not guarantee that the new regime will be more libertarian than the old. The distinctiveness of the Slovak secessionist struggle was that it wanted to separate from the democratic and liberal centre of state power in Prague and the common denominator of the supporters of the secession was their anti-parliamentary radicalism, a strong pro-socialist economic orientation and national intolerance. According to a sociological survey conducted in January 1992, only 13% of Slovaks openly supported secession, and 16% of the population supported a confederation as a form of coexistence with the Czechs. Some form of a common state was supported by 64% of the Slovak population. Amongst this majority, 27% preferred the federation of two equal republics (Center for Social Analysis 1992).

The distribution of the attitudes of Slovak citizens towards the legal arrangement of the state shows another unique feature of Slovakia in comparison with other Eastern European countries mentioned above. This is the inner polarization of Slovak society in terms of its attitudes toward the issue of state structures. This means that the source of the tension is to be found also inside Slovak society itself rather than predominantly in relations with the Czechs.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

The fact that expressions of nationalism have been mostly defined as ethnic or inter-ethnic conflicts did not make visible the fundamental reasons behind these tensions between the Czechs and the Slovaks. Though there had been some objective reasons for the Slovaks to feel and complain about being not equal with Czechs this could have been resolved through negotiations between the Czech and Slovak governmental bodies as well as by the new Constitution of the Czecho-Slovak federation. Disregarding other motivations it is fair to argue that the 'grassroots' nationalist movement had been a defensive reaction to the hardships of the economic transformation.

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Nationalist politicians have explained resistance to radical changes in economic and political structures in terms of their imposition by Prague on 'the poor Slovak nation'. On the one hand, we observed that the Slovak liberal economists who supported and implemented the economic reform at the governmental level either in Bratislava or Prague were labeled 'Czechoslovakists' and attacked as the 'servants of Prague's centre'. On the other hand, one Czech economist, Walter Komarek, who favoured and propagated some 'neo-socialist third way' of economic reform was at that time the third most popular politician in Slovakia! The dominant negative feeling was an expression of social dissatisfaction with radical economic reforms, and cannot basically be interpreted as a kind of anti-Czech attitude in general. Under the proclaimed search for national identity there was hidden the struggle for power by those who would like to have their own 'national revolution' after they failed to be amongst the 'winners' of the revolution for liberty as the Revolution of 1989 is sometimes called.

CONTINGENCY

The ideas of currently fashionable 'chaos theory' may be illuminating also in explaining recent experiences of transition processes in the Central and East Europe. They make us pay attention to the fact that small differences and minor choices, conditioned often by very subjective definitions of a situation, may be capable of producing major effects and result in the channelling of a system in quite different directions from those intended by both actors and those experiencing them. It is convenient therefore to introduce the notion of contingency. Generally this notion of contingency refers to the fact that outcomes depend less on objective conditions circumscribing routinized actions than on subjective evaluations circumscribing unique strategic choices.

An empirical illustration of such a case of contingency in the first outburst of nationalism in Slovakia in March 1990 was President Havel's proposal to modify the official name of the Czechoslovak state by simply omitting the adjective 'socialist' from it. The outcome of this well-intentioned proposal was that the unresolved tensions between Czechs and Slovaks broke out fully for the first time in the so-called 'war over the hyphen'. The Czechs ignored the longing of Slovaks to be more 'visible' in the international scene. By returning to the original name of the common state 'Czecho-Slovakia', Slovaks hoped to inhibit the insulting use of the shorter form 'Czech' even with reference to obviously Slovak personalities or bodies. This 'hyphen war' was commented on in the **New York Times**: 'The Czechs and the Slovaks who are known by their love of absurdity and nuances argue over the

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hyphen'. From afar, and particularly in the context of the brutal conflicts and frictions in other regions of East Europe, it might really have looked like a scene from an absurd play written by Vaclav Havel. However, it was a sign of more serious unresolved problems at the deeper level of social reality.

The reluctance of many Czechs to acknowledge the right of the Slovaks to use the official name with the hyphen in it brought about the first nationalist demonstration in Bratislava and resulted in the birth of the Slovak National Party. So the obsessive adherence to the failed idea of Czechoslovakism on the Czech side provoked the outburst of national feelings on the Slovak side. There is an analogy of such a lack of understanding on the Czech side during the First Republic, when the concept of Czechoslovakism inhibited the solution of ethnic and inter-ethnic tensions between the Czechs, Germans and Slovaks. There is, however, a difference: President Havel, in contrast to T.G.Masaryk, understood the Slovak need for the modification of the former 'false' federation very well, and himself initiated the desired change even against the opposition of some other Czech politicians. It is useful to point out that in Spring 1992 there were still about 40% of the Czechs supporting the idea of an unified state based on the former centralist model as the most rational arrangement for Czechoslovakia.

In March 1990 the significance of that first outburst of nationalism in Czechoslovakia was underestimated by the governing liberal democratic politicians. On the one hand, they did not respond sensitively to the emerging search for national identity with all its inherent irrationality responding to the ideological vacuum created after the fall of the communist regime. On the other hand, the prime minister of the Slovak government, Jan Carnogursky, based his Christian Democratic Movement on the national idea with its historical strength and underestimated the many risks and dangers that it contained. He made another mistake: he overestimated the possibility of regulating nationalism once it had been politically mobilized. His goal was to set in motion Slovakia's quest for membership of the European Community/Union within ten years with the same status as the Czech republic and other member states. He emphasized that his goal was not to be considered the same thing as demanding Slovak independence. As a pragmatic politician he knew that immediate independence for Slovakia would be harmful, that it would cause such domestic and international problems that the Slovak state probably would not survive. The result of his rather unclear statements and position on the issue of a common state was that he was rejected both by the Czech federalists as a 'constitutional nationalist' and by radical Slovak nationalists as not active enough on behalf of the independence of Slovakia.

THE JUNE 1992 ELECTION

In the pre-election period constitutional development was a crucial issue on which all the political subjects had to define their own position. It was also the source of political conflicts both between the parties and supporters of the different models of the state. Some agreement had been achieved on the need to shift from the totalitarian 'false' model of a strongly centralized federation to the authentic federal model which would implement a just and democratic division of powers between the federation and the two republics. The Slovak coalition parties proposed to make a state treaty between the Czech and Slovak republics the legal basis of the common Czech and Slovak state. Behind such a treaty lay the frustration of the Slovaks, caused by the historical failures of the Czechs to respect the previous agreements concerning the state arrangement of Czecho-Slovakia as a state composed of two equal nations.

There was resistance on the side of the Czech politicians to negotiate any treaty because they considered it to be a way toward the split of Czechoslovakia. The Slovaks understood this refusal as the will to maintain the status quo of the earlier 'totalitarian' federation. The Czech politicians argued that a state treaty was incompatible with the principle of a common state because a state treaty had to be signed by two fully sovereign republics and therefore the federation would first have to be dissolved. The fact is that in the constitution of federation in 1968 both republics were proclaimed sovereign. There was a lack of trust over the goals of Carnogursky's CDM as there was suspicion that he conducted only pseudo-negotiations on a common state while he really wanted an independent Slovakia. This crisis of trust together with Czech legalist obsession was a substantial obstruction in the process of constitutional development.

The legitimacy of the former model of federation was based on the assumption that the federation had priority over the individual republics which received their competence from the centre. That was the reason why it had been considered by the Slovaks merely as the prolongation of the concept of the unified Czechoslovak state created in 1918. Slovak representatives demanded the creation of the federation from below. This meant that the federal republic would have received its competencies from the national republics. The federation would have been derived from them. The controversy over the building of the federation either from above or from below has been an unfortunate dichotomy with harmful political consequences. The unwillingness of the Czechs to negotiate had provoked stronger national feelings on the Slovak side and had persuaded them not to

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give up their own demands, leading to the danger of escalation of national and political tensions.

After long talks and negotiations, representatives of both Czech and Slovak National Councils agreed on the conditions for signing the treaty between the peoples of the Czech and Slovak republics. There was a hope of concluding the problematic constitutional development before the elections in June 1992. The draft of that treaty was finally defeated in the Slovak National Council by one absent vote. The opposition parties prevented the governing coalition from achieving success with long-lasting negotiations over the state treaty as the legal basis for the constitution of the authentic federation. The declared argument of those opposition politicians was that the treaty had not been a real modification of the former centralist model of the federation. In this battle, Carnogursky, as an advocate of the federation, was defeated by radical nationalists in his own movement. Such was an unintended consequence of playing with nationalism which spun out of control. The outcome was the split of the CDM, with radical nationalists leaving the original political movement. They established a new party under the name of Slovak Christian Democratic Movement and enlarged the number of nationalist parties.

The stalemate in the constitutional development on the eve of the second free elections in June 1992 may be interpreted as the victory of the opposition political parties in Slovakia that blocked the creation of the new constitutions before the elections. It is justifiable to stress at this point that these opposition parties were a kind of disloyal opposition. Their tactic was to postpone all the crucial decisions regarding the legal arrangement of the coexistence of the Czech and Slovak republics until after the elections. They knew that the majority of Slovaks were still willing to preserve the common state. That is also the explanation why the advocates of an independent Slovakia or of some form of 'looser state association' refused to call for a referendum as the constitutional way of settling the problem of the state arrangement. They calculated that the longer the political uncertainty and the exposure to nationalist propaganda, the greater was the chance of moving public opinion toward a more radical position. At the same time the opposition politicians knew that they had a great chance of dominating the Slovak political scene after the elections, not because of their attitude towards the legal arrangement of Czecho-Slovakia but because of their criticism of the pro-transformation governing coalition and their own populist programme of some 'softer' national economic reform that was presented as less painful for Slovak citizens. They exploited the uneducated economic thinking of the post-socialist population which believed in some easy, simple path of transition from the communist system toward a prosperous and comfortable society.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE ELECTION

One year after the 1992 elections, voters can already compare pre-election promises with the real situation in post-Czechoslovak Slovak society. The present Slovak reality, formed under the influence of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia, can briefly be described by the following features: a dramatic decline in the rate of privatization, the deepening of economic difficulties connected with the break-up of the single Czecho-Slovak economic area, significant restrictive measures in education, the health service, and cultural and social spheres as a consequence of a large budget deficit. The great decrease in the popularity of the governing movement is a natural result of the disillusion of a significant number of its more naive voters, who followed blindly the charismatic personality of Vladimir Meciar.

The price of the independent Slovak state with its programme of a 'national third way' - declared by the current governing elite in its pre-election campaign and shortly after coming to power, but not anymore - will most likely be a deep economic crisis in the country. From the perspective of economic rationality, the separation of Slovakia was against the interest of the nation and the self-interest of the majority of the Slovak people. The truth is that the national interest of a given nation state is what its political representatives determine it to be. It is almost impossible to achieve a consensus on the interest of a state which was divided into two republics in which the elections were won by vastly different political parties. On the one hand, in the Czech republic the winner was Vaclav Klaus, the father of the economic transformation, and, on the other, the Slovak winner was Vladimir Meciar's movement which won its elections on the basis of rejecting that programme.

It is quite understandable that the only point on which the winners of the elections could have agreed was that they needed to break up the state. They both had vested interests in it. This outcome coincided with that which was declared by both political elites as the interest of the nation. Klaus defined this interest as success with the radical economic transformation through maintaining the rapid pace of privatization of the state-owned economy, and the inclusion of the Czech republic in Western Europe, in the European market and the international system of free trade. Meciar had campaigned on a pledge of slowing the pace of economic transformation in Slovakia and achieving for Slovakia the status of an internationally recognized entity. These were obviously goals which were not compatible and plausible to achieve in a common state. At this point I would like to stress that it was not

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incompatible economies but incompatible visions of their future development which decided the fate of former Czecho-Slovakia.

Agreement was achieved relatively easily as a result of a bargain between two pragmatic elites - the new one in the Czech Republic and the old one in the Slovak Republic. The victorious Slovak elite used the ideological argument that it was a historical necessity to emancipate the Slovak nation in the first instance in order to gain power. They were not genuine national-minded people in their hearts. They calculated on the social frustration of the voters and used their lack of legal knowledge to 'emancipate' themselves from more liberal and non-socialist minded Czechs. The voters who decided the results of the elections did not vote in a majority for the split but for the promise of a less painful economic policy. This is the reason why the decision to divide the common state was understood by a large number of citizens of the former Czecho-Slovakia to be an arrogant act of cold-hearted politicians made over their heads against their interests and will.

Considering the huge amount of anti-Czech and anti-federal propaganda in the mass media, I think that the prevalent desire of the Slovak population to preserve one common state has been more surprising than the existence of confused and inconsistent opinions about various aspects of how the state was to be arranged. The results of the sociological survey in January 1992 mentioned above indicate that one third of those who supported the federal form of the state demanded at the same time the superiority of laws of the Slovak republic over those of the federation. But one quarter of the supporters of an independent state also refused the independence of the Slovak army. On the other hand 20% of the supporters of the unified Czechoslovak state wanted an independent Slovak army!

This evidence of a rather confused state of mind and also a high degree of cognitive inconsistency in one third of the Slovak population explains partly why it happened that the elections were won by the movement whose voters were not supporting the separation by an outright majority. The empirical evidence for this assertion is the growing number of those who would have voted against separation if a referendum had been held before the dissolution of the federal state: in March 1993 it was 50% against and 29% for the independent Slovak state, and in October 1993 it was 60% against and only 23% for the dissolution of former Czechoslovakia (Sociological Survey 1993a, p.3; 1993b).

The fact that the 'divorce' was 'velvet' as in the November 1989 revolution was not evidence for its active popular support. In March when the Slovak independent state was a reality, most people in Slovakia continued to be

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convinced that the division of the country was non-democratic because it took place without holding a referendum. According to the above sociological survey, 68% of respondents would have preferred a referendum before the division of the country.

THE LEGITIMACY OF THE NEW STATES

Since it was often objected that neither side had a mandate from its voters to negotiate the breakup of Czechoslovakia, we ought to consider the following crucial question: 'what is the legitimacy of this decision made by these politicians - a decision that will have a historic effect on the future of the two peoples of Czechoslovakia?' The source of the legality of the political representatives derived from the June 1992 general elections which determined the composition and nature of the current political elite. However, we might also ask, is it also a sufficient basis for the legitimacy of such a historic decision?

Without free elections it would have been possible to blame the agreement to split the country on a small group of psychotic politicians who would have been held responsible for that destructive act. But those politicians were elected in free elections and had a mandate from their voters. Therefore a significant segment of the Slovak people cannot be exempted from the responsibility for their choice. They used their freedom, embodied in the right to vote, to delegate power to a strong leader, the charismatic Meciar, with the hope that he would take care of them as well take responsibility for their lives. Once more it is to be stressed that the Slovaks voted overwhelmingly for a party that had clearly pronounced itself against today's already loose federation; in the Czech Republic, the winners were rightist parties, for whom saving the state was not the number one priority. The objection that those people were not aware of the consequences of their choice is not a reason to question the results of the elections. First of all it would mean questioning everyone's right to vote.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CZECHS AND SLOVAKS

The actual results of the 1992 elections offer further evidence for a frequently voiced argument that the Czechs and the Slovaks represent two different societies and peoples with different national mentalities. The crucial question is: what is the nature of these differences; are they compatible or not? One of the specific features of the mentality of the two ethnic nations become visible also at the level of an economic argument. In Weberian terms, there prevailed 'affective rationality' - an emotional element in the Slovak perception of the

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economic problems - and 'instrumental rationality' in the Czech version of the argument. In that sense Slovakia had become an economic burden for the Czechs heading more decisively toward liberal capitalism, and they thought to be better off without it. In the final phase of the disintegration it was the Czechs who were pushing for the final division of the federation. It has been an unique case among other dissolving federations, that the former centre of power not only agreed peacefully to divorce but was demanding a quick realization of the secession fought for by Slovak nationalists from the beginning.

Why was there this radical change in attitudes? Why did the new idea of Czech separatism emerge? After all, the economic differences were known by the Czechs already at the stage when they supported strongly the preservation of the common state. I think that the Czech lands and Slovakia with their peoples represent empirical embodiments of different degrees of modernity. In particular, the Czech lands are the most developed among Eastern European countries, while Slovakia with a tradition of peasant society and rural culture, with its relative recent and abrupt modernization, is an empirical case of a traditional society. The Communist regime actually reinforced the elements and features of this traditional type of society, and succeeded in diminishing the historical gap between the Czech and Slovak society at the expense of the more modern one.

In relative terms, and in the short run, the Slovaks profited more from imposed socialist industrialization as regards their improvement in material well-being. What has been perceived by the Czechs as their backwardness in comparison to the West was perceived by the Slovaks as a steady improvement compared with what had gone before. The different frame of reference for evaluating the achieved level of quality of life explains why there has been both stronger nostalgia for the period of real socialism and criticism of the new regime in Slovakia than in the Czech lands. In the long run, however, Slovakia had been damaged during the Communist regime more severely by the style of the modernization process. The patterns of labour were internalised by the Slovak population during the Soviet style of 'socialist industrialization'. Briefly, while in the Czech lands the earlier capitalist modernization (during the Austria-Hungarian monarchy and the First Republic) brought about, in Weberian terms, the 'spirit of capitalism', in Slovakia after 1948 there had developed more strongly the 'spirit of socialism'.

The differences between the two societies have become more visible under the transition towards liberal capitalist democracy as the goal envisaged by

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liberal politicians. It has been perceived mostly by the Czechs as a challenge, whereas the Slovaks were more apprehensive about the declared end and proposed means. Fears and anxiety about an uncertain future dominated the Slovak population. Sociological surveys showed that there was a significant discrepancy between the two societies in terms of trust in political institutions of the post-November-1989 regime, in politicians advocating economic reforms, and the support for the course of economic transformation itself. The demand for state intervention in the economy and its paternalist role in relation to the citizens was also significantly higher in Slovakia. Finally, most of the Slovak population called for rule by a strong leader (62%) (Center for Social Analysis 1992).

It is fair to argue, then, that the victory of Vladimir Meciar's party reflected the attitudes and demands of a majority of the Slovaks. He had been able to find political expression for prevailing attitudes. Despite the justified accusation of being power-hungry, inconsistent, megalomaniacal, and of riding a nationalist tiger, he was the natural representative of many Slovaks as was confirmed in the June 1992 elections. He was reproached for a lack of principles as he changed his position abruptly from backing an 'authentic federation' to a confederation and then an 'economic and defence union'. His supporters did not object as they were attracted by a charismatic and popular politician rather than by one who adhered to a precise positions. The cognitive inconsistency mentioned above was successfully exploited by the winner of the 1992 elections.

PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY

In Slovakia the incoming nationalist political elite, contrary to the outgoing pro-federal and pro-reform governing parties, has some of the characteristics of provincial elites in decolonized countries of the Third World. There is a hatred for the culture of the capital city, and at the same time anger at the exclusion from it, and consequently an inferiority complex (Jowitt 1992, p.275). After the pro-federal Slovak democrats failed - together with the Czech humanist liberals - to preserve the common state, there is now a need to defend the value of democracy itself. The very word 'federation' was for many Slovaks a synonym for 'democracy'. Therefore it is not such a paradox, as it appears at the first sight, that the strongest support for democratization in independent Slovakia came from former 'federalists'.

Considering the general finding that democracy requires not only a certain level of economic and social development, talented leadership, and a 'dash of fortune', but also intense cultural trauma, I think that Slovakia has to go

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through such a cultural trauma caused both by its first national government and the misery of the separation from the Czech lands, in order to provoke it to struggle hard to establish its own social constituency for democracy. It has already been recently observed that the direct confrontation with arrogant 'home made' power makes a growing number of people defend the values and principles of democracy in Slovakia. However, it will not be a simple process, because there are already now many signs indicating a return, a backlash, to some form of authoritarian regime in the 'sovereign' Slovakia republic.

The description of Slovak politics after the 1992 election as a mixture of Byzantine messianism - the myth of an innocent, suffering nation - combined with a kind of amoral pragmatism, both among the post-communist political elite and those that gave a mandate for the elite, is not a very hopeful starting position for building a new state. Therefore it is fair to conclude that Slovakia after the 1992 elections became for the Czechs not only an economic burden - which it was frequently perceived before - but also a moral and political burden. This is why not only technocratic economists but also humanist liberals supported Czech separatism under the slogan of protecting democracy and the achievements of the Revolution of 1989.

To conclude, may I ask: is national statehood a historical necessity? In general, I propose that the argument about historical necessity is a 'metaphysical' one. It has been, however, an important element in the ideology of those who struggled for an independent Slovak state. However, this argument has itself become a factor in societal change; it played the role of a self-fulfilling prophecy. What was declared as empirical evidence for a 'law of history' was the outcome of the deliberate activity of particular political actors. I doubt that this is equivalent to the 'search for national identity'. Interestingly enough, while it was pronounced first by Slovak separatists it was finally taken over by some Czech politicians. Even Vaclav Havel used this argument about historical necessity when he stepped down, claiming that '...I don't think a single person could have stopped what is historically necessary.' (**New York Times** 1992).

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