Prelude to a Divorce? The Prague Spring as Dress Rehearsal for Czechoslovakia's 'Velvet Divorce'

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ON 15 MARCH 1968, THE SLOVAK NATIONAL COUNCIL issued a proclamation calling for the federalisation of Czechoslovakia. Two weeks later, as public discussion of this and other reforms of the Prague Spring intensified, a Slovak, M. Javorský (1968), wrote to the daily *Rol'nícke noviny* on the meaning of 'equal with equal', the watchword in Slovak demands for a federation. 'It is necessary to think through and apply this "equal with equal" everywhere, really fraternally', Javorský argued.

> It is in the word 'Czechoslovak', and, so it is clear, the abbreviation is also 'CS'. But then why, to give an example, 'ČT'—Czechoslovak Television—'ČR'—Czechoslovak Radio—'Čedok'—Czechoslovak Travel Agency, and so on? It is high time to implement thoroughly the abbreviation 'CS'.

Javorský bemoaned the semantic confusion stemming from the use of 'Czech' or the single letter 'C' as shorthand for 'Czechoslovak'. This 'chaos in nomenclature' befuddled foreigners, he complained. But Javorský's lament also revealed how Slovaks perceived this linguistic convention as a slight to their position within the Czechoslovak state.

Twenty-two years later, another Slovak, Ján Klimko of Bratislava, echoed the rhetoric Slovak reformers had employed during the federalisation debate of 1968. At the outset of what became known as Czechoslovakia's 'hyphen war' in 1990, Klimko voiced his support for incorporating the hyphen into the official name of the state in a letter to the daily newspaper *Smena*: 'This hyphen does not divide but rather it binds us, and it is a symbol of the principle EQUAL WITH EQUAL'.[1]

From the perspective of Slovak elites, 'equal with equal' meant adjusting the Czech–Slovak relationship to provide institutional guarantees of the two nations' equal

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[1]See Klimko's letter under the headline, 'Symboly', *Smena*, 8 February 1990. Emphasis in original.

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standing within the state, along with the devolution of power from the centre in Prague to both republics. This objective remained largely unchanged from the reform movement of the late 1960s to the post-communist transition of the early 1990s. But as the complaints of Javorský and Klimko demonstrated, these seemingly trivial squabbles mattered to Slovaks at all levels. During both upheavals, Slovaks from the elite and the masses saw symbolic issues as symptomatic of deeper philosophical disputes that put strains on the Czech–Slovak union. At their core, these disagreements concerned divergent Slovak and Czech views of reform, democracy and the place of the nation in both.

Slovak and Czech approaches to federalisation during the Prague Spring proved a harbinger of their quarrels following the collapse of communism. As Rychlík (1998, p. 314) writes, 'in the years 1989–1992, nothing appeared in Czech–Slovak relations that had not already surfaced in the past, especially in 1968'. Comparisons between the federalisation debate during the Prague Spring and the disputes preceding the Velvet Divorce of the early 1990s offer insight into the divergent agendas that fuelled Czechoslovakia's dissolution in 1992.

In turn, a closer examination of these parallels shows how many interpretations of the Czech–Slovak split prove wanting. Rychlík (1998, pp. 360–61) attributes Czechoslovakia's disintegration to the different ways Czechs and Slovaks imagined a 'common state', as well as to the failure of the population to embrace a 'Czechoslovak' identity. However, Rychlík's argument suggests Slovaks were to blame for these shortcomings. He seems to imply Slovaks' interest in an 'association of states' or a 'co-state' was incompatible with a common state. Furthermore, in emphasising the weakness of 'Czechoslovak' identity, Rychlík (1998, p. 361) appears to suggest Slovaks were the 'citizens' who 'did not share an awareness that [Czechoslovakia] was their state' since Slovaks had long asserted a separate Slovak identity. True, in 1968 Slovak political and cultural elites called for a federation and symmetrical Slovak and Czech national organs to recognise their distinctly Slovak, rather than Czechoslovak, identity, an objective with broad support among Slovaks. But these demands also reflected a desire of many Slovaks to strengthen the country, a longing to feel Czechoslovakia really was 'their' state. In a similar way, both Slovak elites and masses in the 1990s expressed dissatisfaction with the federation, yet they also hoped reforms would give Slovaks their place within Czechoslovakia.

As seen in public opinion polling from the early 1990s, a majority of Slovaks still wanted a common state. Indeed, throughout the period from 1990 until the split and beyond, opinion polls consistently showed a clear Slovak preference for a reformed Czechoslovakia over an independent Slovak state, as seen in the survey data Hlavová and Žatkuliak have supplied for Slovakia (2002, pp. 325–28). Only 9.6% of respondents from Slovakia in October 1990 said the 'optimal' arrangement of the country would be two independent states, a figure that rose to 15% in January 1991, but stabilised near this level, with 13.4% of Slovaks supporting a Slovak state in May 1991 and 13% in January 1992. Even after the split, only 22% of Slovak respondents to a poll in December 1994 (Hlavová & Žatkuliak 2002, pp. 325–26) identified with the statement 'I was for the break-up of the CSFR from the beginning and I haven't changed my position', with a further 8% saying 'I was for the break-up of the CSFR, but today I think it was a mistake' (Hlavová & Žatkuliak 2002, p. 327). Thus, only

30% of Slovaks polled claimed to have supported the divorce when it happened, a figure consistent with a survey from September 1992, when 27% of Slovaks said they viewed the break-up 'only positively', compared with 36% who said 'only negatively', while another 22% expressed 'mixed' feelings (Hlavová & Žatkuliak 2002, p. 327). Clearly, most Slovaks either opposed or had strong reservations about Slovak independence, whatever their misgivings about the existing federation.

Comparisons of the Prague Spring with the Velvet Divorce also highlight the pre-existing points of disagreement between Slovaks and Czechs that made the dissolution of Czechoslovakia possible in the changed circumstances after 1989. While Leff (1996, p. 135) addresses historical factors, she cites the 'basically incompatible' Slovak and Czech ideas of a new constitutional settlement in the 1990s as the 'sticking point' that made the strains of transition fatal to the state. Similarly, Hilde (1999, p. 647) stresses the immediate pains of transition over more longstanding disagreements, claiming the restructuring of the Czech–Slovak relationship 'proved too heavy a burden' for the new regime to bear in conjunction with other reforms, especially economic reform.

Intentionally or not, interpretations of the Velvet Divorce that prioritise the pressures of the post-communist transition tend to treat the reworking of the Czech–Slovak relationship as a separate issue from the overhaul of the old communist order, a distinction Czech politicians like Václav Klaus often made, but one Slovak politicians such as Vladimír Mečiar and their supporters rejected. Slovak elites and the lower strata of Slovak society saw a reform of Czech–Slovak relations—federalisation—as an integral component of liberalisation in 1968, just as they regarded a reform of the federation as inseparable from processes of transition and economic restructuring after 1989. Though many scholars overlook this interrelationship in Slovak thinking, the connections between the two processes of reform—a critical parallel in both crises—are crucial for understanding the contrast in Slovak and Czech attitudes that facilitated the disintegration of Czechoslovakia.

While the strains of the transition were the proximate cause of Czechoslovakia's break-up, these deeper attitudinal differences to be proved the crucial underlying factor. Cataclysm, whether the upheaval of 1968 or the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, played an enabling role in both cases. Crisis brought to the surface more fundamental disagreements between Slovak and Czech leaders with the potential to split the state. Once sweeping reforms of society became open for discussion, Slovak and Czech politicians and cultural figures articulated different but not incompatible visions of the changes democratisation should bring to Czechoslovakia, diverging chiefly in the priority they ascribed to the nation within Czechoslovakia. Slovak elites also voiced a belief in the democratic rights of the citizen, but they consistently argued for Slovaks' special rights as one of the two 'state-forming' nations within Czechoslovakia, claiming this status conferred a 'democratic' right to national equality with the Czech nation. Understandably, Czechs at all levels exhibited less enthusiasm for this interpretation of Czechoslovak democracy, largely because they saw it as granting outsized importance to Slovaks, a numerical, if not (officially) national, minority.

The real culprit in the Velvet Divorce was not insufficient commitment to a common state, the weakness of 'Czechoslovak' identity or even the strains of the post-communist transition. Rather, as this essay argues, it was different understandings of

democracy, and of the nation's place in democratisation, which caused Slovaks and Czechs to drift apart and eventually to accept the dissolution of the federation. These divergent ideas of democracy were not new in the early 1990s, but descended from the federalisation debate of the late 1960s, centring less on issues of multiparty elections than on balancing competing democratic impulses of regional autonomy and majority rule. During the Prague Spring, many reform-oriented Slovak political and cultural elites regarded the overhaul of the Czech–Slovak relationship, via a federation, as the foundation for more thoroughgoing liberalisation. They expressed their belief in the inseparability of federalisation and democratisation through calls for a symmetrical federation and the prohibition of *majorizácia* (Czech outvoting), which, they argued, would bring democratic principles to bear on Czech–Slovak relations. By contrast, most Czech elites did not place the same stress on the nation within Czechoslovakia, and they did not consider the nation a subject of Czechoslovak democracy on a par with the citizen. Czechs generally regarded federalisation as little more than an adjunct—and at times an obstacle—to democratisation, viewing reform of the Czech–Slovak relationship as less important than other aspects of liberalisation.

The premature demise of the Prague Spring in August 1968 rendered debates over democracy moot for the time being, yet the ensuing two decades of a 'normalised' federation provided fodder for renewed disputes between Slovaks and Czechs after 1989. As in the 1960s, Slovak politicians in the 1990s mined widespread support for federal reform, this time through the creation of an 'authentic federation' or confederation. Many Slovak elites played to a broader desire to see the democratic principles thwarted during Normalisation applied at last to national relations. Yet many Czechs, even those identified with the democratising movement of the Prague Spring like Ludvík Vaculík or Petr Pithart, saw the federation enacted in 1969 as an ill-gotten benefit Slovaks had extracted at the price of greater persecution for Czechs.[2] Consequently, many Czech elites had little patience after 1989 for Slovak demands for a new constitutional position, believing as in 1968 a reformed federalism should take a back seat to more pressing issues of political and economic transformation.

In hindsight, it seems obvious that Slovaks and Czechs had already rehearsed the disagreements preceding the Velvet Divorce during the earlier federalisation debate. It would be a mistake, however, to draw a straight line from the 'marital' discord of the late 1960s to the amicable 'break-up' of the early 1990s. The fall of communism in 1989 removed the limitations that had constrained arguments over Czech–Slovak relations in 1968, while mutual suspicion and mistrust between the two partners grew during two decades of communist federation. Nonetheless, the parallels between these two periods make clear that Slovaks and Czechs largely rehashed old disputes over the federation when a new opportunity emerged after 1989. And yet, these comparisons show 'divorce' was not inevitable, since both partners expressed interest in patching up

[2]Vaculík (1990) helped to stoke Czech–Slovak tensions when he flatly accused Slovaks of viewing democratisation as a Czech affair in 1968 and abandoning Czechs after the invasion in order to gain a federation and milder punishment. Reflecting on the break-up, Pithart (1995, p. 327) claimed 'Slovaks gave precedence to federalization over democratization' during the Prague Spring: 'That is why after August 1968, Slovakia was not punished so severely', which 'helps to explain why Slovaks looked upon the period preceding November, 1989 with a mixture of not only aversion and embarrassment, but also nostalgia'.

their differences. Despite their qualms, many Slovaks remained committed to Czechoslovakia, pending reforms to make the partnership more equitable. On the other side, several Czech elites recognised Slovaks' national accent on democratisation as an effort to strengthen the union. Differences of opinion in how Slovaks and Czechs approached democracy doomed the marriage only when opportunistic Czech and Slovak politicians painted these differences as irreconcilable, orchestrating a divorce in the summer of 1992.

The Prague Spring: federalisation or democratisation?

During the 1960s, national-minded Slovaks became increasingly frustrated with their position within Czechoslovakia. Key bodies of Slovak self-rule, such as the Slovak National Council (*Slovenská národná rada*, SNR), a legislative and governmental body founded by the wartime resistance, or the Board of Commissioners (*Zbor povereníkov*), a Slovak administrative organ founded in 1944, had lacked specifically Czech equivalents since the re-establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1945. Instead, state-wide Czechoslovak bodies based in Prague, such as the National Assembly (*Národní shromáždění*) and ministries of the government, doubled as Czech national organs, meaning Czech national organs enjoyed *de facto* legal supremacy over Slovak organs, an arrangement Slovak proponents of federalisation later criticised as 'asymmetrical'. More importantly, the Communist Party of Slovakia (*Komunistická strana Slovenska*, KSS), another Slovak body created during the Second World War, had no Czech counterpart and was subordinate to the state-wide Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ), extending this asymmetry to the Party as well as the state. But the 'socialist' constitution introduced in 1960 took this *de facto* arrangement one step further, formalising the unequal and subordinate position of Slovakia by eliminating some Slovak bodies, like the Board of Commissioners, and officially reducing the competency of the SNR and other Slovak national organs that remained. The net effect was to intensify the feeling among many Slovaks that they lived under Czech rule.

Even before the new constitution's ratification, some Slovaks lashed out at it as a symbol of Czech domination. In April 1960, an anonymous Slovak sent a letter to L'udovít Benada, a member of the KSS Central Committee (*Ústredný výbor*, ÚV) complaining about the plight of Slovak national organs. The author questioned how 'Czechs like you'—expressing the view that leading 'Slovak' functionaries like Benada or KSS First Secretary Karol Bacílek were crypto-Czechs of dubious Slovak origin—could 'bargain so recklessly' with other Czechs over the fate of Slovak institutions. The letter conveys the Slovak sentiment that 'Prague', synonymous with 'Czechs' in the minds of many Slovaks, ruled Slovakia for its own benefit, without regard for Slovak interests and without meaningful participation from *bona fide* Slovaks. The author of the letter also claimed Antonín Novotný, the KSČ first secretary, 'stole like a Gypsy' the right to self-governance that belonged to Slovakia.[3] This unsigned letter revealed how, from the beginning of the 1960s, there was already considerable discontent with

[3] *Anonym zaslaný s. Benadovi*, 14 April 1960. Slovak National Archive (SNA), ÚV KSS, carton 2232.

the position of Slovakia, which Slovak elites later mined in claiming the Slovak nation enjoyed a special status within the Czechoslovak state that entitled it to national equality, though initially Slovak elites and the masses felt unable to voice this desire openly.

Slovak grievances slowly crystallised around transforming Czechoslovakia into a federation of two equal national states. This idea first emerged in a study the Slovak historian Miloš Gosiorovský drafted from 1960 to 1962 and submitted to leading functionaries in the KSČ and KSS Central Committees in March 1963. Gosiorovský criticised the constitution of 1960, remarking how the diminished position of Slovak national organs and the elimination of the Board of Commissioners consigned the Slovak nation to the position of being the only nation in the socialist camp that did not have its own ethnic territory and organs of socialist state power that were adequate for its existing development, its current level, its size, and especially its needs for a fully equal position as a nation in a multinational state (Gosiorovský 1968, p. 12).

In response, the KSČ Central Committee called Gosiorovský a 'political prostitute' who tried to exploit a sensitive issue for his own benefit, and it blocked publication of his study.[4] Despite the Party's rebuke however, Gosiorovský distributed his study to Slovak intellectuals. His insubordination earned him the Party discipline of 'censure with warning', but the dissemination of Gosiorovský's ideas helped the goal of a federation to penetrate the thinking of Slovaks.[5] In June 1963, a 'group of national and Party workers' in Slovakia sent a letter to the Soviet Consulate in Bratislava, in which they bemoaned the plight of Slovakia under the current constitutional settlement: 'Today's Slovak National Council and other Slovak national and central organs remain only symbols of national organs. The whole economic, political and cultural life of Slovakia is basically directed from Prague'.[6] The way to rectify this state of affairs and the solution for which its authors appealed to the Soviet comrades came straight from Gosiorovský's study: a federation of Slovakia and the Czech Lands.[7] Gosiorovský's study also prompted the KSS to take a closer look at the position of Slovak national organs in order to appear responsive to popular pressure, even though the KSS did not budge on its position.[8]

Nonetheless, Slovak proponents of a federation had to wait until the upheaval of 1968 to voice this desire publicly without fear of reprisal. In turn, the appearance of federalisation as a cardinal demand among the Slovak public during the Prague Spring revealed how individuals throughout Slovak society, not just at the elite level, linked reform of the national settlement to larger questions of liberalisation. In particular, the advocacy of symmetry by reform-oriented Slovaks—the establishment of parallel Slovak and Czech national organs subordinate to state-wide Czechoslovak bodies—as the institutional expression of 'equal with equal' showed how several Slovaks

[4] *Záznam o besede s. Dubčeka, prvého tajomníka ÚV KSS s predsedami ZO KSS SAV a funkcionármi CZV KSS pri SAV*, 6 March 1964. SNA, ÚV KSS Presidium (P-ÚV KSS), carton 1121.

[5] *Návrhy rehabilitačnej komisie ÚV KSS*, 17 May 1968. SNA, P-ÚV KSS, carton 1205.

[6] *Anonimný list zaslaný konzulom*, 19 June 1963. SNA, ÚV KSS Secretariat (S-ÚV KSS), carton 239.

[7] *Anonimný list zaslaný konzulom*, 19 June 1963. SNA, ÚV KSS Secretariat (S-ÚV KSS), carton 239.

[8] *Z referátu s. Dubčeka na zasadnutí ÚV KSS*, 6 June 1963. SNA, P-ÚV KSS, carton 1168.

understood federalisation as the application of democratic principles to national relations.

On the surface, symmetry offered a remedy to lingering Slovak perceptions of Czech domination. Július Strinka, a member of the commission that prepared the KSS Action Programme, explained in a *Pravda* interview in April 1968 what symmetry meant to Slovaks:

> We can speak about symmetry at that time when both state-forming nations are, in the full sense of the word, independent and able, this means that each nation is in and of itself master on its own territory, and in accord with this is, naturally, also fully equipped with appropriate power organs and institutions, legislative, administrative, judicial, cultural, etc. The organs of one nation are, simply put, the mirror image of organs of the second nation, in this they are in a relationship of symmetry. (Zajanová 1968, p. 5)

Like other Slovak advocates of symmetry, Strinka (1968, p. 1) envisioned a federation as its precondition. A symmetrical federation would be an 'enormous conquest', he argued, not just for fulfilling Slovak desires, 'but also from the standpoint of the democratic structure of the whole republic'. Symmetry would dispel Slovak notions of Czech rule while also enshrining the democratic right to national equality to which both Slovaks and Czechs were entitled within Czechoslovakia as state-forming nations.

Strinka and other pro-reform Slovaks connected federalisation to democratisation, viewing a federation as unthinkable without democracy. In their view, democracy did not mean free elections as much as giving both individuals and nations a greater say in matters directly affecting them, such as allowing Slovak bodies a greater role in managing Slovakia's economy rather than following the policy decreed from Prague. Though Slovak antagonists of liberalisation, mainly hardliners like the new KSS first secretary Vasil Bil'ak, tried to divorce federalisation from democratisation in an effort to sidetrack more thoroughgoing reforms, reform-minded Slovaks conceived the two processes as inseparable (Steiner 1973, p. 175). As Strinka explained to an interviewer in April 1968,

> it would be a fateful mistake if we divided a federation from democratisation, if we saw in it a self-contained goal, the achievement of which in and of itself would solve the problems of the nation and ensure its unhindered development. (Zajanová 1968, p. 5)

Federalisation was only part of the solution, Strinka argued, since the form of federation would do little to redress Slovak grievances without democratic content.

Calls for federalisation garnered an overwhelmingly favourable response from Slovaks. In a poll conducted in April 1968, 79% of Slovaks expressed full agreement with the federation proposed in the KSČ Action Programme, with another 15% voicing partial agreement; none of the Slovak respondents said they disagreed with federalisation (Piekalkiewicz 1972, p. 111).[9] Anecdotal evidence also supported claims

[9]Czechs exhibited less enthusiasm for federalisation, yet they still supported it in sizable numbers, with 52% of Czech respondents in the same poll agreeing fully with the proposed federation and another 31% agreeing in part, while just 10% of Czechs said they disagreed with this proposed adjustment to the Czech–Slovak relationship (Piekalkiewicz 1972, p. 111).

of virtually unanimous support among Slovaks for a federation. As of 31 May 1968, the SNR Presidium received 550 letters and resolutions regarding its proclamation of 15 March 1968, which called for a federation, and the KSČ Action Programme introduced in April 1968, which also endorsed federalisation. This response showed significant Slovak backing for federation. The Presidium reported 'unambiguous and unqualified support' for a federative arrangement, as 'a number of letters stress the need to expedite to the maximum degree the realisation of federalisation'.[10]

During the Prague Spring, as in the period following the collapse of communism, the response from the Czech public to Slovak calls for a reform of the national settlement was more tepid, but not wholly unfavourable. For example, in a roundtable discussion in March 1968, Bedřich Rattinger, who helped with the KSČ Action Programme, endorsed the view that nations also had democratic rights and regarded federalisation as part of democratisation:

> If, today, we speak about the application of democratic principles in our society, we must also apply them between both our nations. The absence of political democracy, which we felt here in the Czech Lands, is doubly felt in Slovakia. The problem appeared in Slovakia not only as an absence of democracy for the individual, but also as an absence of democracy in the application of national rights and interests.[11]

In the same conversation, the Czech legal expert Zdeněk Jičinský, who worked on the federalisation law, echoed Rattinger in pronouncing Czech–Slovak relations a vital question.[12]

Nonetheless, federalisation remained a lower priority for many Czechs. In June 1968, the Slovak historian Samo Falt'an (1968) expressed dismay that 'considerable silence endures' on federation among much of the Czech public, even though most Czechs agreed to this reform in principle. Falt'an was flabbergasted by the attitude he saw among most Czechs that 'federalisation was only the wish of Slovaks, and since they want it, they shouldn't have it'. 'The virtue of this calamity', he explained, 'is that it attests first of all to the misunderstanding of the principles of democratism in relations between two nations' (1968, p. 1). The root of the disagreement, as Falt'an perceived it, was not that Slovaks' emphasis on federalisation made them less committed to democratisation, as many Czechs claimed. Rather, he indentified Czechs' reservations regarding federation to their lacking a clear grasp of what democracy and 'democratism' meant in the national milieu of Czechoslovakia, where Slovaks and Czechs were recognised formally as state-forming nations. Falt'an implied the two nations were entitled to a voice in matters affecting them within Czechoslovakia, just the same as individual citizens.

As spring turned to summer in 1968, fault lines emerged in disagreements over the shape of the new federation. At the core of these conflicts lay the issue of how best to

[10] *Informácia o rezolúciach a listoch došlých Predsedníctvu Slovenskej národnej rady v súvislosti s Vyhlásením SNR z 15.3.1968 ako aj k Akčnému programu KSČ*, 10 June 1968. SNA, SNR Presidium (P-SNR), carton 167.

[11] 'Federácia klope na dvere', *Práca*, 23 March 1968, p. 6.

[12] 'Federácia klope na dvere', *Práca*, 23 March 1968, p. 6.

institute the formal equality (*rovnoprávnosť*) of both nations, and what mechanism, if any, should prevent *majorizácia*, the outvoting of Slovaks by the larger Czech nation. In contrast to the discord of the early 1990s, by July 1968 the committee preparing the law on federation had agreed that the Czechoslovak federation would be founded on parallel Slovak and Czech national-state entities, with sovereignty originating from the two national republics.[13]

Questions of parliamentary parity and the prohibition of *majorizácia* proved more difficult however. An SNR report on preparations for federalisation identified three main variants in proposals for expressing the equality of the two nations.[14] The first scheme, proposed by the SNR Presidium and associated with the Czech professor Jiří Boguszak, called for a unicameral Federal Assembly with deputies apportioned by national parity rather than proportionality. A second variant, introduced by the Czech legal scholars Jiří Grospič and Zdeněk Jičinský, inclined toward the opposite extreme. Grospič and Jičinský proposed a unicameral Federal Assembly with deputies allotted according to population. Their plan gave Slovaks an absolute veto over constitutional questions, but Czech representatives could still pass laws on crucial matters such as the state budget and economic planning without the support of a single deputy from Slovakia.

The third variant presented during the Prague Spring offered a hybrid of proportionality and parity. This plan, the SNR Presidium's second alternative, envisioned a bicameral Federal Assembly. The House of the People would base representation on population, upholding the principle of proportional representation, while the House of Nations would have national delegations of equal size. Both chambers would operate according to majority rule, but bills would require majority support in both houses, and from both halves of the House of Nations.[15] This third variant formed the basis of the law on federation signed in October 1968. As the new democratic order revealed after 1989, this mix of proportionality and parity gave Slovaks a *de facto* veto in the Federal Assembly, which forced Czech deputies to take Slovak interests into account as intended, but also allowed a small number of Slovak deputies to obstruct parliamentary business.

Disagreements over *majorizácia* in the Federal Assembly fuelled suspicions during the federalisation debate, but they also exemplified the underlying difference in the way Slovaks and Czechs conceived of democracy. The question of whether nations enjoyed democratic rights in the way that citizens did, and of how to reconcile the equality of the two nations with the equality of each individual citizen, laid bare disagreements on how members of both nations understood democracy. National equality seemed to matter less to Czechs in large part because they did not perceive the issue as a problem to them personally, since Czechs could not be outvoted on national lines, rendering the nation as a collective political actor less important than the aggregate force of individual (Czech) citizens.

[13]*Informácie o stave prípravných prác návrhu ústavného zákona o federalizácii ČSSR*, 22 July 1968. SNA, P-SNR, carton 170.

[14]Cartoons published in newspapers at the time indicate that these debates were of interest to the general population. See for example Figure 1 which was published in *Pravda*, 9 August 1968.

[15]*Informácie o stave prípravných prác návrhu ústavného zákona o federalizácii ČSSR*, 22 July 1968. SNA, P-SNR, carton 170.

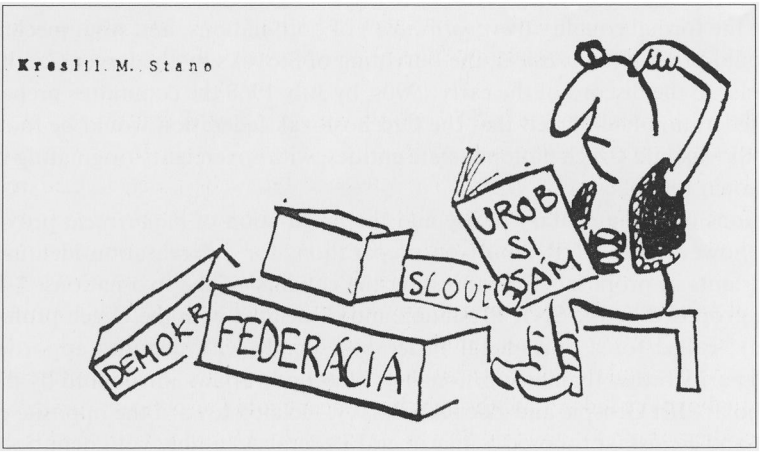

FIGURE 1. 'DO IT YOURSELF': FEDERATION COMING BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND SLOVAKIA (MILAN STANO, *PRAVDA*, 9 AUGUST 1968)

But the same numerical disparity that made national equality a non-starter for Czechs made the matter all the more important to Slovak elites, who sought to qualify majority rule in order to balance the democratic rights of individuals and (state-forming) nations. The writer Zora Jesenská saw protections for the smaller Slovak nation as consistent with a more broadly applicable democratic principle that majority rule should be balanced with protections for the minority, a principle that held for nations the same as individual citizens:

> This does not only mean minorities of nationalities ... since each of us can in some cases belong to the majority and in others to the minority. And only in the case of the weaker is it possible to say whether there is a democracy here. (Jesenská 1968, p. 1)

As Jesenská showed, one could defend the nation without being a nationalist or trampling the rights of the individual citizen. But Slovak reformers' insistence on prohibiting *majorizácia* followed in particular from their belief that Slovaks, like Czechs, enjoyed a democratic right to national equality within Czechoslovakia because they were a constitutionally recognised state-forming nation, unlike the Magyar and Rusyn minorities in Slovakia. At the same time, pro-reform Slovaks could leverage their standing as a state-forming nation to bring the will of individual Slovak citizens to bear on the Czechoslovak state, since the Slovak nation as a unified political subject was more powerful than the collective weight of individual Slovak citizens—a scenario many Czechs criticised because it made the political clout of the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Whether Slovak elites thought the nation should have the same rights as the individual or their Czech counterparts believed nations did not possess democratic rights, their arguments during the federalisation debate amounted to differences in principle on the form—but not the content—of democracy in the Czechoslovak

context. Yet many on both sides failed to draw this qualitative distinction between form and content, causing these philosophical differences to generate mutual mistrust.

A series of polemics erupted in July 1968, sparked by the contrasting Slovak and Czech attitudes regarding the role of the nation. Speaking in Bratislava on 5 July, Gustáv Husák warned the KSS city conference that federalisation had reached a critical juncture owing to the divergent conceptions of democracy: 'In Czech circles, a federation is being proposed according to the principle of "one citizen, one vote"'. In Husák's view, this approach would mean the preservation of the status quo: 'The equality of nations must be ensured so any sort of *majorizácia* of representatives of the smaller, that is, of the Slovak nation in federative organs is precluded'.[16] Husák endorsed an unarticulated principle of 'one nation, one vote', which appeared to place the nation above the individual, though this concept could also be interpreted as a way to protect the rights of individual Slovak citizens. But Husák exacerbated the conflict over the relationship of the nation to the individual by ascribing national attributes to mere differences of opinion, making it seem as if Czechs as a whole sought to wield their numerical superiority to dominate the Slovak nation.

On 10 July, Grospič and Jičinský responded to Husák in *Rudé právo*, arguing for the need to uphold the importance of majority rule, the principle underpinning their proposal for a unicameral Federal Assembly (Grospič & Jičinský 1968, p. 3). In turn, Grospič and Jičinský's reply to Husák elicited a new wave of critical responses in the Slovak press. On 11 July, E. R. Štefan attacked the two Czechs for failing to respect Husák's synthesis of democracy for nations as well as citizens. Štefan showed greater contempt for what he saw as Grospič and Jičinský's failure to understand Slovaks' insistence on prohibiting *majorizácia*:

> In relations between two nations there is not and cannot be such rhetoric about a majority and a minority. The ratio of votes in questions of national sovereignty, as well as in relations of Czechs and Slovaks, is and otherwise will always only be one to one. And only in respecting this ratio is it possible to fulfil democratically the principle equal with equal.... (Štefan 1968, p. 1)

Crucially, Štefan did not reject the concept of majority rule or the primacy of the individual citizen; he simply stressed that in specific scenarios—namely matters of Czech–Slovak relations—the nation was a more important political actor than the individual citizen. Two days later, the Slovak legal experts Vojtech Hatala and Karol Rebro (1968a) offered a more sympathetic view of Grospič and Jičinský's proposal, judging it well intentioned but wanting, since its insistence on majority decision-making would violate national equality, given the disparity in population between the two nations. Hatala and Rebro articulated an idea expressed by Jesenská and other Slovak elite members, arguing neither the nation nor the individual should take precedence over the other, because both entities had democratic rights. The best way to protect these rights, Hatala and Rebro (1968b) maintained, was a federation, which

[16] 'Federácia v krízovej situácii', *Práca*, 6 July 1968.

'should stand for democracy for the individual citizen, while it should also stand for a large community of individual citizens, as it is all one nation'.

These polemics inflamed passions on both sides, with arguments over the meaning of democratisation and the place of federalisation within it. As the Slovak historian Jaroslav Šolc commented in August 1968, Slovaks found Czechs' condescension on the national issue baffling, given the belief common among Slovaks that federalisation was a question of democracy:

> Democracy and national sovereignty, democratisation and federalisation are intimately connected for the majority of Slovaks, and therefore they have a hard time understanding the several months of constant tutelage from Czech intellectuals (and from several Slovak exponents) that first should come democratisation, then federalisation. In Slovakia we have a historically conditioned, unfailing reference to the fact that we cannot separate, prioritise and subordinate one to the other. (Šolc 1968, p. 5)

The experiences of the interwar period, Šolc explained, had already taught Slovaks that democracy could not survive without a solution to the Slovak question (a federation) and vice versa. Another Slovak legal scholar, Karol Laco, echoed this sentiment in terming the reform of Czech–Slovak relations an 'organic component of the democratisation process'. Laco (1968, p. 12) voiced a conviction shared by other reform-oriented Slovaks that 'without a democratic adjustment of the constitutional relationship of Czechs and Slovaks, thorough democracy is unthinkable'.

The Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 brought an abrupt end to efforts at democratisation, but not to federalisation. Preparations continued up until the symbolic deadline set during the Prague Spring for 28 October 1968, Czechoslovakia's 50th anniversary. Yet federalisation in the absence of democratisation disappointed many pro-reform Slovaks when it failed to bring a symmetrical arrangement of national organs. Under Normalisation, Czechoslovak bodies continued to double as Czech national organs, keeping Slovak organs in a subordinate position. Plans to create separate Czech national organs were not carried forward in many cases, most critically with the KSČ, which never followed through on proposals to create a separate branch for the Czech Lands. For Slovak protagonists of the Prague Spring, without the symmetry needed to enshrine the democratic rights of the Slovak nation, the federation remained incomplete.

Marital difficulties after the fall of communism

Nonetheless, when Czech politicians and cultural figures looked back after 1989 on the federalisation of the Normalisation period, they often regarded it as a Slovak betrayal. Moreover, Slovaks' realisation of one of their principal aims with the Kremlin's apparent connivance encouraged post-communist Czech elites to think of themselves as selfless champions of the democracy that Slovaks had selfishly undermined. The Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík set off a new round of controversy during the 'hyphen war' when he suggested Czechs would be better off parting with their 'Slovak little brother'. One of the reasons Vaculík presented for ending the union was

the ingratitude Slovaks had demonstrated for Czech sacrifices during the Prague Spring:

> When we tried to free ourselves from dictatorship in 1968, Slovaks regarded this as our concern and went for autonomy. When we were then punished for our revolt, they, seeing how they were not very committed to us, received milder punishment; and their autonomy, which they took advantage of our revolt to get, meant for us an aggravated punishment that did not fall on them. (Vaculík 1990, p. 1)

Slovaks may have gotten their federation, Vaculík and many other Czechs believed, but Czechs had paid the price for it, whether through the loss of jobs to Slovaks in the name of national equality or by heightened investment in Slovakia at the expense of the Czech economy.[17] This attitude made these Czechs less willing to tolerate renewed Slovak calls for a reform of the national settlement and the creation of an 'authentic federation'.

Naturally, their Slovak counterparts had a different opinion of the birth of the federation. In November 1990, the Slovak premier Vladimír Mečiar offered a rationale for why Slovaks had proceeded with federalisation after the invasion, claiming Slovaks had sought to rescue one of the key reforms of the Prague Spring. But Czechs had misread Slovaks' motives, he claimed, because they failed to grasp federalisation's democratic essence. Czechs wanted to postpone federalisation in order to try to protect what could still be salvaged from the reform movement, Mečiar explained, failing to understand 'the constitutional arrangement was also a component of the democratisation process. Thus, suspicions arose that Slovaks had other interests. They did not, they only wanted to gain what could still be gained in the given moment' (Mečiar 2002, p. 136). Slovaks did nothing wrong in proceeding with federalisation, Mečiar insisted. They simply sought to make the best of a difficult situation and meant Czechs no harm.

But what mattered after the collapse of the communist regime was not the reality of Slovak and Czech experiences with federalisation, but rather the way Slovaks and Czechs perceived the federation and blamed each other for its failings. The developing controversy in the spring of 1990 over the new name of the state reminded Petr Šabata (1990, p. 2) of the Slovak proverb, 'Under Novotný, the Czechs ruled us and it was bad', and the Czech retort, 'Under the federation, the Slovaks ruled us and it was even worse'. Many Czechs accused Slovaks of profiting from federalisation and Normalisation while Slovaks responded by accusing Czechs of not appreciating the need for a federation in spite of the invasion. After 1989 this mutual mistrust became a stumbling block to necessary processes of transition, especially economic reform.

Controversy over the Czech–Slovak relationship emerged in January 1990, when President Václav Havel proposed that the Federal Assembly delete the word 'socialist' from the name of the state, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and adopt a new, non-communist coat of arms. To the surprise of Havel and other Czechs, this

[17]See, for instance, Pithart's claim (1995, p. 327) that the boost in Slovakia's standard of living under Normalisation inspired a certain 'nostalgia' for this period among Slovaks.

suggestion inflamed Slovak passions. According to Jičinský, Havel's proposed name change would have probably been approved by parliament without incident had he not connected it to the question of the state emblem. Instead, by suggesting the country create a new coat of arms, Havel touched an open wound for Slovaks (Rychlík 2002, p. 112).

The state emblem was a sensitive subject for Slovaks, especially those with longer historical memories, not because they hated to part with the communist coat of arms, but rather because the emblem was a reminder of what they believed was their subordinate position in the Czechoslovak state. Havel had tried to show concern for Slovak sensibilities in his speech to the Federal Assembly, urging it not to revert to the original coat of arms from 1920, 'because for us it is all inevitably joined historically with the idea of a single Czechoslovak nation' (Havel 2002a, p. 59). But Havel's rejection of both the 'Czechoslovakist' emblem of 1920 and the communist shield of 1960 required a new coat of arms, which led national-minded Slovaks to fixate on how best to represent symbolically the national equality they wanted.

There was a precedent from the 1960s for the Slovak complaints concerning the Czechoslovak coat of arms that resurfaced in the 1990s. In the communist emblem of 1960, adopted with the socialist constitution, the Czech lion occupied the dominant position, capped with a five-pointed communist star instead of the traditional Czech crown. The shield depicted Slovaks in a subordinate position, exchanging the traditional Slovak crest of a double-barred cross (representing St Cyril and St Methodius) atop three peaks (Tatra, Mátra and Fatra) with the flame of the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 burning on a generic mountaintop.[18] In 1968, Husák had suggested a change of emblem in conjunction with federalisation, since Slovaks and Czechs needed a coat of arms that 'speaks to them' as the traditional symbols of both nations had before.[19]

When Slovaks addressed the issue of a new emblem in 1968, they 'almost uniformly proposed to return to the traditional Slovak emblem', but their proposals also called for a coat of arms that 'should express symbolically the equal position of both our nations of Czechs and Slovaks'.[20] A Slovak expert in heraldry, Jozef Novák, proposed a new emblem in May 1968, a shield divided into equal halves with the Czech crest on the left side and the Slovak emblem on the right. Novák regarded his emblem as 'symmetrical', and believed this coat of arms would be adopted only when the 'real conditions' for it—a symmetrical federation—arose in Czechoslovakia (Novák 1968). The state emblem mattered to pro-reform Slovaks in the late 1960s, just as it did to Slovaks at all levels in the early 1990s, because it symbolised more than just the equal footing of the Slovak nation within the Czechoslovak state. For many Slovaks, the adoption of a new, symmetrical state shield represented a sign of good faith that

[18]'Návrh štátneho znaku Československej socialistickej republiky', *Smena*, 13 July 1960.

[19]'Slovo má dr. Husák', *Smena*, 14 April 1968.

[20]*Informácia o rezolúciach a listoch došlých Predsedníctvu Slovenskej národnej rady v súvislosti s Vyhlásením SNR z 15.3.1968 ako aj k Akčnému programu KSČ*, 10 June 1968. SNA, P-SNR, carton 167.

Czechs were willing to treat them as equal partners and apply the principles of democracy to relations between the two nations.

The continuity of this attitude among reform-oriented Slovaks became apparent early in the 'hyphen war', when several Slovak cultural figures published a statement on the emblem in *Smena*.[21] They criticised the interwar coat of arms some Czechs wanted to restore, because 'the Slovak emblem was placed on the breast of the Czech lion unequally and asymmetrically'. The statement claimed to speak for the Slovak public, which 'categorically rejects this as undemocratic, antifederative, ahistorical, and with a demagogic anti-Slovak subtext'. To make the emblem democratic, the signatories proposed adopting the emblem Novák had first proposed during the federalisation debate. The statement made explicit a view held by several Slovaks that accepting a symmetrical symbol of the state was a question of consistently respecting the democratic rights of the Slovak nation.

But the most visible and contested symbol of the Czech–Slovak disagreements to come was the hyphen proposed for the name of the state. A cross-section of Slovak society responded to Havel's call for a name change, with many arguing for the insertion of a hyphen in the word 'Czechoslovak', yielding the 'Czecho-Slovak Republic' (and other permutations), or 'Czecho-Slovakia' for short. For Milan Zemko, a Slovak historian, the adjective 'Czechoslovak' recalled the 'mistaken' thesis of a single Czechoslovak nation:

> The simplest and most logical solution is offered in the introduction of the perhaps still always feared (but why should we be afraid of it?) hyphen in the name of the whole republic, the Czecho-Slovak Republic and, needless to say, Czecho-Slovakia. (Zemko 1990, p. 1)

The hyphenated name made it clear the country comprised two distinct nations, Zemko believed, plus it corresponded to tradition, since the name of the state had been written as Czecho-Slovakia, with a hyphen, from 1918 to 1921.

But many Czechs resisted the hyphen because it recalled traditions less pleasant to them. 'Czecho-Slovakia' had also been the name of the short-lived Second Republic that existed from the Žilina Agreement of October 1938 to the Third Reich's annexation of the Czech Lands in March 1939. Czech representatives' refusal to adopt the hyphen and Slovak deputies' insistence on it forced an awkward resolution when the Federal Assembly first adopted a name change on 29 March 1990, with the country officially the (unhyphenated) 'Czechoslovak Federative Republic' in the Czech Lands and the 'Czecho-Slovak Federative Republic' in Slovakia (Act on Name Change 2002a, p. 73). This compromise satisfied no one. Though many Slovaks welcomed the new name used in Slovakia, most expressed unhappiness with the adoption of two names for the same state. Many regarded the law as a fiasco and thought Czechoslovakia would lose respect with two official names. Other Slovaks voiced displeasure that the hyphenated name was not applied uniformly, and they doubted

[21]The signatories included the cartoonist Milan Stano, writers Jozef Pavlovič and Štefan Moravčík, the journalist L'udmila Neamcová, Rudolf Demovič, the political writer Vladimír Daubner, the teacher Gabriela Gombošová, and 'many others' not named. 'Stanovisko k znaku a názvu našej republiky', *Smena*, 30 January 1990.

the outcome would have been the same had the country been called the 'Slovakoczech Republic', with a 'small c' used for the Czech nation.[22] Less than a month later, a second law provided a more workable compromise, renaming the country the 'Czech and Slovak Federative Republic' (CSFR) in both languages (Act on Name Change 2002b, p. 80).

For national-minded Slovaks, the hyphen was a symbol of their national identity. It both recognised them as a nation and expressed their equality with the Czech nation. These Slovaks felt their insistence on a hyphen was a justified call for applying democratic principles to national relations, which made it all the more puzzling when Czechs labelled such demands 'nationalistic' or 'separatist', reserving the 'patriotic' mantle for themselves. In April 1990, the Slovak Librarians Society warned of the disintegrative effects this one-sided tolerance would have on the state, since it would only play into the hands of actual (not imagined) Slovak separatists. Fair treatment by one side of the legitimate demands of the other was a precondition for a secure federation, the Slovak librarians argued:

> We think our common state can be a federation of two really equal nations only when all the laws, the legislative and economic decisions to approve the path [of transition] from below are mutually respected. The supreme and representative expression of this equality is also the uniform name of the federation.[23]

But mutual respect was in short supply during the 'hyphen war', with Czech public figures taking a dismissive attitude toward Slovak demands while some Slovaks viewed Czech criticism as hypocritical. In June 1990, Štefan Polakovič (1990) wondered 'why the advocacy of the political separation of Slovaks and Czechs in the spirit of a confederation should be a "criminal" political act', when it simply offered a way for Slovaks to fulfil their democratic rights as a nation, such as putting an end to the '*majorizácia* of Slovakia by Prague'. Slovaks' calls for a looser arrangement of the Czech–Slovak union were not nationalism, Polakovič maintained, since nationalism was characterised by 'snobbery, disrespect, impatience, truculence, force and cruelty toward other nations' (Polakovič 1990, p. 10). If anyone was guilty of nationalism, Polakovič contended, it was Czechs. Czech deputies had exhibited their contempt for Slovaks as a nation by demonstratively yawning and reading newspapers in parliament as Slovak representatives spoke out in favour of a hyphen. 'This Czech mannerism was a manifestation of disrespect and defiance toward the Slovak nation', Polakovič explained, 'the lowest level of nationalism' (Polakovič 1990, p. 10).[24]

The clash of attitudes: irreconcilable differences?

At stake during the 'hyphen war' and beyond was whose vision of democracy would prevail and what consequences it would have for the transition. Slovak political

[22]'K názvu republiky', *Práca*, 31 March 1990.

[23]'Chýba symbol národnej identity', *Pravda*, 2 April 1990.

[24]Polakovič, the chief ideologue of the wartime Slovak state who had outlived communism in exile, criticised Czechs' 'nationalism' without apparent irony, showing how some Slovaks played the democratic card opportunistically.

representatives entered discussions over the federation after 1989 with an agenda taken straight from the Prague Spring. When Mečiar arrived at Trenčianske Teplice for constitutional talks in August 1990, he brought the Slovak game plan of 1968, championing the principle that all federal powers derived from the republics as sovereign national states (Innes 2001, p. 101). As Mečiar explained at an SNR plenary session,

> we follow from the fact that the basis of the state is the free citizen, who joins into free communities, free communities into free republics, and republics as bearers of sovereignty [*suverenita*] pass along part of their own sovereignty to federal organs in that which is favourable to them. (Mečiar 2002, pp. 136–37)

Mečiar showed he could advocate the cause of the nation without coming across as a nationalist, since he placed the citizen above the nation, which nonetheless was a close second. Moreover, Mečiar's understanding of federalism, a view shared by many Slovaks, saw sovereignty originating from the bottom up. His notion of sovereignty also showed how nations and individuals had interrelated democratic rights. Implicit in Mečiar's vision of citizens forming 'free communities' was the idea that these communities of individuals were nations, which in turn stood as democratic subjects in the Czechoslovak context. Thus, Mečiar saw a relationship between the democratic rights of nations and individuals identical to the ideas prevalent in Slovak thinking during the federalisation debate of 1968.

By invoking the Slovak agenda from the Prague Spring, Mečiar appealed to many Slovaks who felt the goals of 1968 had not been realised. Whereas reform-minded Slovaks had called for a federation based on symmetry in the late 1960s, their successors in the early 1990s advocated an 'authentic federation' as the solution to the Slovak question. In June 1990, Dušan Nikodým (1990) explained that an 'authentic federation' meant the constitutions of the two republics determined the powers of the federal state and government, and not the other way around. This vision of an 'authentic federation' as a Czech–Slovak partnership in which power originated in the two republics was identical in its essence to Slovak demands for a 'loose federation' (*vol'ná federácia*) in 1968, when Slovak reformers had sought a union of national states with original sovereignty.[25] A 'loose federation' had confederative elements, since the federation existed at the pleasure of both national states, with the implication that either one could elect to dissolve the federation. Yet the citizen remained the foundation of an 'authentic federation', Mečiar explained, since 'every citizen is a citizen of the federation, but at the same time is a citizen of the republic'—a reaffirmation of his contention that nations were 'free communities' of 'free citizens' (Mečiar 2002, pp. 137–38).

Much as Slovak demands for rapid federalisation had seemed overzealous to pro-reform Czechs during the Prague Spring, calls for an authentic federation appeared just as bewildering to them after 1989. Mečiar noted how 'Czechs pose the question to us of why Slovaks are again raising the question of federation and why they are again beginning a public discussion of these questions. It is simple: because we still are not a

[25] 'Federácia v štádiu príprav zákona', *Práca*, 8 June 1968.

federative state' (Mečiar 2002, p. 136). Slovak and Czech differences over reform of the federation proved an obstacle to the post-communist transition, since their divergent attitudes on the question bogged down the new constitutional settlement.

In the same way some Slovak observers felt these federal issues detracted from more important reforms, a few prominent Czechs appreciated the need to be sensitive to Slovak grievances. The Czech premier Petr Pithart communicated his understanding of the Slovak position following the Trenčianske Teplice talks, remarking 'there is no other path to strengthening the federation than strengthening the competency of the republics'. Because the federation was a voluntary union based on the will of both nations, 'mutual trust, accommodation and then voluntarism' were essential (Pithart 2002, p. 108). Similarly, Havel expressed his empathy for Slovak frustrations following failed efforts to solve the Slovak question in 1918, 1945 and 1968:

> Is it any wonder Slovaks, after this third disappointment, do not want to be disappointed for a fourth time? Is it any wonder sometimes they are perhaps impatient and demand the rapid construction of an authentic federation more energetically than Czechs? (Havel 2002b, pp. 112–13)

Slovak demands for an authentic federation and the priority they placed on this reform were understandable, even justified, as Pithart and Havel acknowledged, demonstrating the willingness of at least some Czechs to comprehend the Slovak position. Yet Pithart's and Havel's empathy for the Slovak position did not amount to sympathy, since these two Czech leaders lacked the enthusiasm of Slovak politicians for federal reform.

Furthermore, the empathy of these two political leaders did not extend to all circles of the Czech public, creating disagreements that eroded the commitment of many Slovak and Czech politicians to preserve their union. Slovak leaders continued to insist on prohibiting *majorizácia*, which their belief in the democratic rights of both nations within Czechoslovakia required. Yet Czech politicians and commentators felt frustrated by what they perceived as Slovaks' determination to obstruct other reforms, especially economic liberalisation, until their demands for national equality were realised. As Vaculík explained to Soňa Čechová in April 1990, no constitutional provision could resolve this issue:

> Equality between Czechs and Slovaks—just as it concerns equality between men and women—cannot succeed in being directed by any institution, by any established relationship [that] there needs to be one to one or two to one. Real equality between people, let it be man–woman, Czech–Slovak, begins when the most capable people are chosen without regard to whether they are Czech or Slovak. (Čechová 1990, p. 4)

Vaculík hoped Slovaks and Czechs could finally transcend their mistrust and embrace an equality based on merit rather than proportion. He also implied Slovaks had failed to recognise that equality and democracy were a matter of mutual trust, not legislation, as the deficiencies of the communist federation had shown. In arguing against formal national equality, Vaculík revealed that insofar as he had given any

thought to the democratic rights of the two nations within the Czechoslovak state, he considered these less important than the rights of the individual citizen, irrespective of nationality.

Similarly, Zdeněk Eis accused Slovaks of quashing the democratic rights of Czechs by subjecting them to a peculiar form of *majorizácia*. Eis (1990) acknowledged Slovaks were not homogeneous in their attitudes, and it would be 'the greatest mistake' for Czechs to judge all Slovaks by the opinions of a few. He even recognised the validity of Slovak concerns for their rights as a nation. But Eis's patience wore thin when it came to Slovak parties blocking progress on a constitutional settlement until they secured a confederative arrangement. As Eis wrote in August 1990, this obstructionism subverted the essence of democracy:

> We went through federalisation on national principles, and this led to the suppression of democratic principles. A democratic order recognises above all the relationship of the majority and the minority ... So there is no mistake: I am against the *majorizace* of Slovaks in all their national affairs. But I am also against the *majorizace* of Czechs by a numerical minority. (Eis 1990, p. 1)

Eis laid bare the conflict between majority rule and national equality that had created friction between Slovaks and Czechs during the federalisation debate in 1968 and threatened to drive the two nations apart in the early 1990s. The will to live in a common state was not lacking on either side, as Eis recognised for Slovaks and exemplified for Czechs. In spite of this shared desire, Slovak and Czech leaders had divergent ideas about the democratic rights of the nation and the urgency of federal reform in the context of the transition, differences that increasingly seemed incompatible. The two nations had drifted further apart following federalisation in 1969, a product in part of the dissatisfaction on both sides with the effects of Normalisation on the federation.

Moreover, even as Vaculík and Eis urged their compatriots to judge Slovaks on an individual, rather than collective, basis, they lapsed into generalisations in suggesting Slovaks had failed to appreciate the importance of mutual trust or majority rule, to the detriment of Czechs, which reinforced national binaries. In this way, political and cultural elites on both sides mapped differences of opinion onto the two nations, leading Slovaks and Czechs to view each other as uniformly minded nations rather than differentiated entities. The perception of a uniform 'Slovak' or 'Czech' view of the state and the federation fuelled a rising sense that disagreements over federal reform were part of a more intractable dispute between the two nations. Yet these same differences of opinion were not irreconcilable and did not doom Slovaks and Czechs to divorce. However, what became apparent from the outset of the 'hyphen war' was the perception gaining ground in both nations that their disagreements could not be resolved within Czechoslovakia.

An amicable break-up

The constitutional impasse persisted beyond the 'hyphen war', through the conflict over competency in 1991, and cast a pall over the elections of June 1992. When the

parties of Vladimír Mečiar and Václav Klaus triumphed in their respective republics, the prospects for forming a governing coalition were not encouraging. However, the likelihood of a protracted, contentious process of coalition building brought an unpleasant surprise when Klaus almost immediately proposed the break-up of Czechoslovakia. Mečiar all but claimed Klaus had arrived for talks in Brno after the election intent on dissolving the federation, saying Klaus' delegation decided on ending the federation after 40 minutes of discussion.[26]

Klaus' unwillingness to indulge prolonged coalition talks made the disintegration of Czechoslovakia seem unavoidable. But when Klaus pronounced the death of the federation at Brno in June 1990, it proved a *fait accompli* only because Slovak and Czech elites both proved willing to accept it. The notion that the marriage was unworkable resonated among the population more widely because it squared with the attitudes of sizeable segments of both nations, even as majorities on both sides still openly opposed a split.

In particular, the speed with which segments of the Czech public accepted Klaus' assessment of the federation and its future made his pronouncement of its demise a self-fulfilling prophecy. Within two weeks of Klaus' declaration in Brno, several Czech cultural figures, including Vaculík, published a statement in *Literární noviny* expressing their opinion on the apparent end of Czechoslovakia. The preamble of the statement made it clear whom these Czechs blamed for the imminent divorce:

> Elections in the Czech Republic as well as the spectrum of opinions and forces from left to right affirmed the will of our nation for a free economy and political democracy. In Slovakia they point to a development toward a society directed by the state, with elements of national socialism, and these two tendencies cannot, in our opinion, be joined in a common will under a common government. It is startling to us.[27]

Pro-reform Slovaks at least must have been surprised at the assertion of a Slovak creep toward 'national socialism'. Though meant mainly in terms of state intervention in the economy (more popular in Slovakia than the rapid privatisation favoured in the Czech Lands), the term offered an unpleasant reminder of the wartime pro-Nazi Slovak state.

Even more telling, however, was the way the Czech supporters of the statement pinned blame for the current crisis on Slovak voters. A referendum on dissolution would be redundant, according to the statement, since elections in Slovakia had expressed the will of the Slovak nation to divorce. The break-up of Czechoslovakia was described as a welcome relief to these Czechs, who noted how the Slovak question 'got a different answer than we wished', but would be resolved at last.[28]

[26]'O dezintegrácii federácie rozhodol Klaus', *Smena*, 8 July 1992.
[27]'Úleva z rozhodnutí', *Literární noviny*, 18–24 June 1992, p. 1.
[28]'Úleva z rozhodnutí', *Literární noviny*, 18–24 June 1992.

In a similar vein, a front-page editorial in *Mladá fronta Dnes* from June 1992 promoted the idea that Czechs had tried hard to save the federation, but now had to yield to Slovaks' separatist desires:

> We fully understand the legitimacy of the emancipatory efforts of the Slovak nation. But we will not abandon the idea that the terrain of a federal Czechoslovakia could be secure and broad enough for the solution of all conflicts and the realisation of these efforts ... It seems the Slovak nation wants and must have its own statehood, though this experience will be quite painful.[29]

Even though he was a Czech politician, Klaus took the decisive step to press for divorce, just like another Czech, Vaculík, first broke the taboo on a break-up during the 'hyphen war'. Many Czech elite members embraced the suggestion that Slovaks were to blame. They offered little resistance when Klaus proclaimed the end of Czechoslovakia because the notion of Slovak guilt seemed to fit with their pre-existing attitude that not only had Slovaks hindered the post-communist transition in their stubborn insistence on a reformed federalism, but it was Slovaks who were responsible for the poor functioning of the federation in the first place.

Despite these disagreements, neither in the early 1990s nor during the late 1960s were Slovak and Czech differences of opinion beyond repair. Both during the Prague Spring and in the years leading to the Velvet Divorce, many Slovak and Czech elite members tried to reconcile their differences and reach an accord, since most members of both nations still exhibited the will to live together in Czechoslovakia. Yet disagreements over the meaning of democracy in a Czechoslovak context, and in particular over what democratic rights the two nations should possess and what priority these should have in democratisation, degenerated into mutual mistrust, even enmity. The sheer length of the squabbles over federalisation and a reformed federalism—a dispute many individuals on both sides dated to the Prague Spring—led members of both nations to become retrenched in their positions and question whether a breakthrough would ever happen. It was these lingering doubts, stemming from divergent but not incompatible Slovak and Czech attitudes toward the position of the nation within democracy, which led Slovaks and Czechs first to entertain the possibility of living without the other partner, and then helped them to accept the end of Czechoslovakia with relatively little resistance or remorse when word of its demise came in June 1992.

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