Czechoslovakia 1990Frantisek Miklosko

short line

Sasha Bell  
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**The Fall of Communism**

In his book *Perestroika: New Thinking For Our Country and the World,* Mikhail Gorbachev writes of how “[the Soviet Union’s] rockets can find Halley’s comet, and fly to Venus with amazing accuracy, but side by side with these scientific and technical triumphs is an obvious lack of efficiency in using scientific achievements for economic needs, and many Soviet household appliances are of poor quality.” Whether he knew it or not, Gorbachev was referencing the most tragic failure of communism: its tendency to stifle a country’s economic growth. After almost four decades under Communist rule, Czechoslovakia’s GDP per capita is only $3,100, and inflation rates have reached a record high.[[1]](#footnote-0) My country’s rapid and unrestrained industrialization has proven fruitless when paired with the inherently restraining nature of a command economy.

And more than industries have suffered under Communist rule: Gustáv Husák’s “normalization” program condemned thousands of free thinkers to unemployment and uneducation. It enabled human rights abuses by eliminating any dissenters: in 1969 alone, 29 Liberals were removed from the KSČ Central Committee and replaced with conservatives.[[2]](#footnote-1) Communism’s one-party policy paved the way for such abuses of power, and prevented any accountability - until now.

After months of protest by hundreds of thousands of citizens, the KSČ has finally agreed to drop the one-party system in favour of true democracy.[[3]](#footnote-2) The legislation has been removed; the monopoly of power has been relinquished.[[4]](#footnote-3) But the question remains: What now? A framework of policy solutions must be developed and implemented to tackle the problems facing Czechoslovakia today.

**Achieving Slovak Self-Determination**

Relinquishing communism in favour of democracy is only the first step to repairing the fractures that threaten to undermine this historically unstable region. Racial tension within Czechoslovakia is a growing concern, as it has become evident that the Czechs and Slovaks are inclined to enjoy economic prosperity only at each other’s expense. Slovak separatism has been a major influence in national politics since the early 1930s, but has always been given a back seat to the relationship between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.[[5]](#footnote-4) During the “Golden Age” of communism, the eastern Slovak region experienced a surge of economic growth while the Czechs relied on Soviet handouts.[[6]](#footnote-5) But the tables turned, and separatism reemerged in force, when the rampant industrialization of Slovak regions brought with it a plague of illness, environmental damage and eventual stagnation.[[7]](#footnote-6) Evidently, the Czech and Slovak peoples have nothing to gain by continuing to live as one nation. Their identities and goals remain separate at best, and at worst run contradictory. As a Slovak politician with my people’s best interests at heart, I will fiercely advocate for Slovak independence. A border could be placed between the central cities of Zilina, Zlin and Moravia, with an eastern Slovak nation and a western Czech nation in reflection of current population demographics.[[8]](#footnote-7) Czechoslovakia must be formally divided, so that the Slovak *and* Czech peoples are free to pursue their destinies in the means they see fit.

**Economic Reform**

Previous attempts to facilitate economic growth in communist nations have been woefully inadequate. Gorbachev’s *perestroika* failed because it was limited by the constraints of communism.[[9]](#footnote-8) This so-called “restructuring” of political and economic systems, spurred by stagnation and declining living standards, was in essence an attempt to restore elements of a free market system while maintaining the facade of communism.[[10]](#footnote-9) The Soviet Union’s 1987 Law on State Enterprise took the first step towards a true free market system by allowing limited enterprise: states were allowed to dictate their own wages and prices, in an attempt to create *incentive* to improve performance and profits.[[11]](#footnote-10)Incentive, one of the tenets of free marketism, was acknowledged by the Soviet Union as a means of growing the economy.

True economic growth can only be achieved in a free market society. Large-scale privatization must be implemented; the subsequent competition and innovation will stimulate economic growth. Inequality and volatility are often cited as the major drawbacks of a free market system, but such complaints ignore the prevalence of these elements in Czechoslovakia’s command economy. The past four decades have seen high inflation and periods of economic depression. These cycles of prosperity and (mostly) poverty were produced by the unyielding and uncompromising nature of the command economy.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Industrial development can be encouraged by instituting low corporate taxes, and modifying outdated factories to reflect modern standards of efficiency and sustainability. Many industries in eastern Czechoslovakia show huge untapped potential for growth, including mining and metallurgy, machine tools, textiles and clothing, ceramics, wool paper, industrial chemicals, fertilizers, petroleum products, food processing and iron ore processing.[[13]](#footnote-12) All of these industries represent opportunities for the future Slovak nation to ascend to the world stage as a major industrial nation. One of my chief priorities in the upcoming series of discussions will be to underline eastern Czechoslovakia’s industrial potential, and develop a framework for its future growth.

**Political Literacy and Participation**

Political literacy and participation, values crucial to any democratic society, have been systematically undermined for decades by the KSČ. Education was prioritized for children who were more likely to uphold communist values - and often denied completely to the children of lower class households. In 1971, a KSČ representative publicly acknowledged his party’s policy of discrimination: "The selection of applicants [to schools] must clearly be political in character … We make no secret of the fact that we want to do this at the schools in a manner that will guarantee that future graduates will be supporters of socialism and that they will place their knowledge at the service of socialist society."[[14]](#footnote-13) Amnesty International supported this claim, and went a step further by reporting in 1980 that educational institutions ranked applicants in the following order: children whose parents were both KSČ members, children of farmers or workers, and children with one parent who was a KSČ member. Children who met none of these criteria were prioritized last.[[15]](#footnote-14) While education from six-16 years of age has been compulsory in Czechoslovakia since 1984, there has been no government initiative to rectify the systematic discrimination of the 1970s, and disparities still exist in the level of education received by children of different social standings.[[16]](#footnote-15) No information is publicly available on the acceptance policies of post-secondary colleges, enabling future discrimination on their part with no threat of government retribution. Slovak families in rural eastern Czechoslovakia stand especially at risk under these unfair and classist policies. A national inquiry must be launched into the acceptance policies of elementary schools and colleges, to detect and eradicate any elements of bias toward the children of communists.

Furthermore, while education has been standardized since 1975, little has been done to introduce political literacy into the curriculum.[[17]](#footnote-16) I strongly support the implementation of a civics course in public schools, to educate Slovak children on their rights as citizens and their role in a democratic society. Political literacy and participation can and must be increased through education and the eradication of discriminatory policies.

A lack of voting accessibility is another barrier to full political participation. In the build-up to the June 1990 election, a publicity campaign should be launched to inform citizens of their role in deciding future leaders. Ballots must be available in all the country’s major languages, to combat a language barrier that could prevent ethnic minorities from voting. For the future Slovak nation, the languages represented would include Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, and Czech.[[18]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, voting stations, and transportation thereto (possibly in government buses) must exist in every region of the country. The population density of Czechoslovakia as defined by its current boundaries is only 121 people per km².[[19]](#footnote-18) With the majority of the eastern Slovak region being sparsely populated farmland, an abundance of voting stations and transportation methods are crucial to encouraging voter participation.

**Religious Freedom**

Czechoslovakia’s historically tense relationship between church and state was further exacerbated by the domineering policies of the KSČ, which imposed strict regulations on many aspects of religious ceremony. The breaking point came in 1980, when students at the Bratislava Cyril and Methodius Faculty of Divinity underwent a hunger strike in protest of state-controlled religion.[[20]](#footnote-19) Government policy at the time, designed to curb the populace’s devotion to religion, actually birthed a movement of underground churches in Czechoslovakia.[[21]](#footnote-20) The leaders behind this initiative, including Ján Čarnogurský, bravely thwarted the KSČ’s overreaching and oppressive laws to promote Christian values that were now more than ever under attack.[[22]](#footnote-21) Now that communism has fallen in Czechoslovakia, the work of these religious leaders must be duly honoured and endorsed by the ruling party. I am the speaker for the Christian Democratic Movement, a prominent Slovak political party that resolves to maintain democracy through the upholding of Christian values. We will work to remove legislature that threatens religious freedom under the guidance of our valiant leader Ján Čarnogurský. Clerical appointments, religious instruction, preaching and proselytization will no longer be subject to scrutiny by the state; as God intended, these holy rites are the sole jurisdiction of the church.

Under the Communist regime, children have been forced to adhere to a strict secular doctrine, deprived of the spiritual grounding necessary to navigate the world. The CDM recognizes the importance of religion in fostering a healthy sense of community and personal identity, and will implement religious education in schools to further this goal. The construction of churches, vital infrastructure that contributes to employment and fosters a sense of community, will also be a priority. Such measures, in conjunction with economic growth and increased political participation, will allow the Slovak country to reach its full potential and emerge a powerful nation in its own right.

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