

## INTRODUCTION

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE UNEXPECTED PUZZLE**

Politics in Slovakia and the Czech Republic diverged sharply after Czechoslovakia dissolved, but not for the reasons that are usually given. Although many observers were quick to explain the divergence, few felt the need to offer a detailed explanation. The answer seemed too obvious, and all of the leading indicators appeared to point in the same direction. The Czech Republic's successful democratization flowed naturally from the country's successful embrace of the free market, its past experience with democracy and its educated, western-oriented political elite. The near collapse of Slovakia's democracy, by contrast, was the inevitable outcome of a backward economy made worse by tendencies toward an economic "third way" and by a preponderance of nationalist and authoritarian attitudes in Slovakia's society that filtered directly upward into the political leadership. The two countries thus fit conveniently into existing frameworks for understanding the success or failure of democratization on the basis of economic development or nationalism or political culture, and scholars were free to turn their attention to other, more interesting cases.

But the fit was artificial. Most observers overlooked early indications that the obvious answers did not work. Slovaks and Czech political developments did differ dramatically, but only in a few specific realms. Furthermore, opinion research revealed unexpected similarities in the attitudes of Slovaks and Czechs, and the two countries recorded surprisingly similar economic performance. By the middle of the nineties it was becoming clear that explanations predicting democracy's success in the Czech Republic

and its failure in Slovakia had reached the right answer largely by accident. By the end of the nineties the standard accounts of Slovak and Czech differences crumbled in the face of dramatic political changes in both countries. An electoral victory by Slovakia's opposition parties reversed the deterioration of political relationships within Slovakia's democracy. Meanwhile, politics in the Czech Republic became bogged down by a series of minor but significant scandals and awkward political maneuvers.

A more complete account of Slovak and Czech politics during the 1990's must look beyond the failed socio-economic and cultural explanations. A belief in structural inevitability distracted attention from the more dynamic elements of Slovak and Czech political life: the political parties. Parties played a central role in shaping the political trajectories of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. And although parties in any country are products of the environment, the differences between Slovak and Czech parties show how institutions can transcend and even shape their surroundings. To their own surprise, Slovak and Czech parties found that skillful use of organization and political appeals could overcome societal attitudes and other structural barriers.

### **The missing links**

This dissertation adds a new step to explanations of Slovak and Czech differences. Rather than leaping from political differences to socio-economic and cultural differences, it looks in between at the differences in the functioning of Slovak and Czech political institutions. Rather than simply labeling Slovakia as a failure of democratization and the Czech Republic as a success story, the dissertation examines the particular institutional changes that contributed to the Czech reputation for success and the Slovak reputation for failure. It then turns from exposition to explanation and shows how differences between Slovak and Czech parties influenced the different outcomes in a more fundamental way than any other institutional differences. Only then does the dissertation turn to the powerful factors of economy and religion, nation and political culture and show how

these both affected parties and were, in turn, affected by them.

At each level of the explanation, the dissertation revisits both the conventional wisdom surrounding the question and the methods that scholars have used to gather their data. At each level it becomes readily apparent that important details have been overlooked and that commonly used approaches do not offer the necessary tools for making sense of those details. In some cases, the theory is relatively well developed but observers lacked solid data. In other cases, the data was available but without an appropriate framework for understanding it. A combination of new data and the application of a different theoretical approach at each level offers a more complete account of Slovak and Czech differences and provides answers to three basic questions:

### **How did Slovak and Czech politics differ during the 1990's?**

Although the political outcomes of Slovakia and the Czech Republic and Slovakia differed dramatically, particularly between 1994 and 1998, the nature of the difference is not as obvious as it might seem. Observers described the two countries as "divergent neighbors" and wrote articles about Slovakia entitled "Turning Back?"(Fisher, 1995f) and "Being Left Behind"(Hrib, 1998); the European Union and NATO accepted the Czech Republic for membership while rejecting Slovakia's solely on political grounds. Yet when scholars applied widely accepted definitions of democracy, they found it difficult to tell the two countries apart (Kopecky & Mudde, 1998). The most common definitions of democracy--so-called minimalist definitions inspired by Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy--place extremely high emphasis on free and fair elections and the prerequisites for such directions, but do not go much further. Since the beginning of the 1990's, however, a growing number of scholars have called attention to the relationship between political institutions in the periods *between* elections. These scholars argue that strongly and enduring democracies require not only the vertical accountability of leaders to citizens through the electoral process but also the horizontal accountability of elected and

appointed leaders to one another. Through a careful analysis of political developments in both countries during the 1990's, this dissertation shows that Slovak and Czech politics differed primarily in the degree of *horizontal* accountability among institutions. In the Czech Republic institutional actions tended to remain within distinct limits. In Slovakia, by contrast, a majority coalition in parliament systematically removed restraints through actions ranging from skewed committee appointments in parliament to outright physical intimidation of opponents.

### **What role did political institutions play in the difference?**

Although Slovakia and the Czech Republic differed in the degree of accountability among institutions, there were very few institutions that played any role in the differences that emerged. Most commonly offered institutional explanations simply do not apply. Formal institutional design was almost identical in the two countries, and most Slovak institutions followed the same rules in the same ways as their Czech counterparts. The presidents, courts, the military, private-sector media, economic actors and civil society of the two countries were not identical, but the differences were either too small to influence the political outcome or were irrelevant to questions of accountability. This process of elimination isolates the key difference explaining Slovak and Czech differences in the respective parliaments and their appointed governments. These, in turn, depended exclusively on political parties.

At first glance even the two party systems are almost indistinguishable. Commonly used indicators of how well political party systems enhance democracy-- indicators such as party system size, volatility, party organization and centralization-- show few significant overall differences. But when several of these measurements are considered together and reinterpreted in the light of party competition they provide a coherent account of differences in Slovak and Czech horizontal accountability. Two developments unique to Slovakia contributed to its relative lack of horizontal

accountability: 1) one party significantly outpaced others in the development of organization, centralization and breadth of electoral appeals, and 2) party competition became focused on questions of political authority and accountability. The parties within Slovakia's majority coalition were unanimous in their rejection of horizontal accountability, and their unanimity allowed them to eliminate key restraints within the system. In the Czech Republic, by contrast, attributes detrimental to accountability were more evenly distributed across the political spectrum. Coalitions--and even individual parties--failed to develop coherent positions on accountability questions and therefore did not exert pressure for or against institutional encroachment. Since Czech parties were able and willing to exert restraint upon one another, accountability among institutions remained largely intact.

#### **How did underlying socio-economic and cultural factors affect institutional behavior?**

Although the Slovakia and the Czech Republic differed significantly in their attitudes on certain important questions, the differences in these underlying factors simply cannot explain the full range of differences between the Slovak and Czech party systems, and therefore cannot explain the different political outcomes of the two countries.

Reports of deep differences between Slovaks and Czechs have a long history and powerful inertia. Each of the commonly mentioned differences corresponds to an established hypothesis about the conditions necessary for successful democratization. On the basis of the reported difference between Slovaks and Czechs, each hypothesis predicts more success for democracy in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia:

- *Economy.* Scholars have long posited a causal connection between economic outcomes and democratic outcomes (Dahl, 1971; Lipset, 1959). Surveying the full range of potential explanations, recent works contend that the longevity of democracies is positively related to affluence, positive economic performance and reductions in income inequality (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi,

1996). Slovakia began its independent existence with less wealth than the Czech Republic and less apparent economic potential. Early forecasts about the Slovak and Czech economies almost invariably contrasted Czech prosperity with Slovak economic collapse and ensuing political chaos (Economist, 1993b).

- *Religion.* Scholars have also suggested a historical relationship between religiosity--particularly Roman Catholicism--and the rejection of democracy (Elster, Offe, & Preuss, 1998; Huntington, 1992; Putnam, 1993). Slovakia's significantly higher levels of churchgoing and religious belief cast doubt on Slovakia's ability to democratize as successfully as the Czech Republic (Hrib, 1998), and Slovakia's experience of wartime authoritarian rule by Roman Catholic clergy appears to confirm these tendencies.
- *Political culture.* Accounts of Slovakia and the Czech Republic written during the 1990's draw such sharp contrasts between the two countries' political culture that the divergent political outcomes of the mid-1990's appear almost inevitable. Authors describe the political inclinations of Slovaks as "traditional"(Carpenter, 1997), "populist"(Ulc, 1996) and "communist" (Kusy, 1995) and suggest that political ideas such as "constitutionalism" were "almost entirely alien to their social understanding"(Elster et al., 1998, 301-302). By contrast, observers describe the political culture of the Czech Republic as "democratic" and "civic."
- *Nation.* A prominent theme in political science literature is the link between nationalism and authoritarian politics (Kedourie, 1960; Kohn, ). Observers commonly describe Slovaks as more "nationalist" and "separatist" than their Czech counterparts (Kusy, 1995), who are often described as having risen above nationalist feelings (Pynsent, 1994), and Slovakia's nationalism is frequently cited as a reason why its political outcomes differ from those of its neighbors (Carpenter, 1997; Ulc, 1996).

Yet even though each of these explanations is plausible and finds scholarly support, not

one of them can account for the actual institutional circumstances behind the differences in Slovak and Czech levels of horizontal accountability.

Closer examination reveals that many of the alleged differences did not live up to claims made on their behalf. Despite dire predictions, Slovak and Czech economic performance remained relatively similar during the 1990's, a development that caught experts by surprise (Economist, 1993c; Fisher, 1995f; Milbank, 1994). Explorations of political culture likewise revealed markedly similar opinions about authority and democracy, especially in comparison to those of surrounding countries. Furthermore, although the two populations did differ in their opinions on national issues, the exact contours of the differences remained extremely complex.

Of the few differences between Slovaks and Czechs that did fit expectations, none could explain the two countries' institutional differences. Slovaks remained considerably more likely than Czechs to support state management of the economy, to approve of the former-communist regime, to attend church on a regular basis and to believe in God, but these differences bore little relation to popular support for the parties that helped to destroy accountability in Slovakia and helped to preserve it in the Czech Republic.

A close look at the relationship between attitudes and party support confirms a phenomenon that was alluded to by the unexpected 1998 reversals in Slovak and Czech politics: political outcomes did not depend as much on popular attitudes as on how voters decided in favor of particular parties. Slovakia's difficulty lay not in a greater number of voters with authoritarian attitudes but rather in the nearly unanimous choice of those voters for a narrow range of political parties. When those parties obtained a majority, as they did in 1994, they were able to move swiftly to undercut relationships of accountability among institutions, confident that their voters would not care. When those same parties lost their majority, as they did in 1998, the incoming coalition brought with it a mandate to restore accountability. In the Czech Republic, by contrast, voters tended to vote on economic rather than political lines, and those who did base their vote on

political questions found no easy way to differentiate among their electoral choices. Thus even though the Czech Republic's authoritarians comprised as large a share of the population as in Slovakia counterpart, they found themselves dispersed across the political spectrum and devoid of political influence, and the Czech Republic thereby avoided Slovakia's political oscillation.

The extremely complicated relationship between voters and parties calls into question the direct influence of socio-economic and cultural factors. Instead of unyielding forces that determined political development, the prevailing attitudes on politics, religion, the nation and the economy proved surprisingly malleable in the hands of political parties. Parties could not, for the most part, change deeply held opinions, but they could increase or decrease the role that those opinions played in the choice of political party, and to link particular opinions together to harness the momentum of one for the benefit of another. Slovak and Czech parties alike used a combination of these methods to advance their political agendas, but the main parties in the two countries differed harnessed very different sets of issues. Those choices led directly to differences in party and coalition actions and the resulting differences in horizontal accountability.

### **Organization of the argument**

The three sections of this dissertation address, in turn, each of the questions raised above. Section I looks for the specific differences between Slovak and Czech political development during the 1990's. Chapter two explores the limits of minimalist definitions of democracy and complements them with guidelines for understanding and assessing the horizontal accountability. Chapter three examines political developments in Slovakia during the 1990's and reinterprets them in terms of horizontal accountability. Since the events of the 1990's remain the subject of bitter partisan disputes--including even basic questions of who did what to whom--the chapter carefully re-evaluates the claims and counter-claims of rival political actors. Chapter four undertakes the same task

for the Czech Republic (without the same burden of adjudicating among rival accounts of the same event) and compares the findings for the two countries.

Section II identifies shows how differences in political parties were responsible for the accountability differences identified in the previous section. Chapter five demonstrates the absence of meaningful differences among institutions other than parties. Chapter six sets out a framework for examining specific aspects of parties and party systems and defines ways in which the Slovak and Czech party systems were similar, while chapters seven and eight focus on the differences. Chapter seven focuses on organizational differences, and chapter eight emphasizes differences in the dimensions of party competition. Chapter nine reveals the direct link between the party system differences and levels of horizontal accountability and re-evaluates current strategies for categorizing parties and party systems in light of the Slovak and Czech experience.

Section III demonstrates that the differences in Slovak and Czech party systems resulted more from different strategic choices by Slovak and Czech parties than from differences (or similarities) in the socio-economic and cultural factors. Chapter ten re-examines conventional wisdom surrounding the economic, social and cultural differences between Slovaks and Czechs and finds that many longstanding assumptions simply do not hold true. Chapter eleven shows that the strongest influence on differences in Slovak and Czech party system development was not any overall difference in the opinions of Slovak and Czechs but rather a difference in the issues on which Slovaks and Czechs decided to vote for particular parties. Chapter twelve explores the origins of these decisions and finds little relation between them and underlying social, economic or even demographic patterns. Chapter thirteen demonstrates that the prevailing influence of different issues in the two countries resulted largely from different particular strategic decisions by their main political parties. Finally, a conclusion assesses the impact of Slovak and Czech patterns of party competition on future political development and discusses the application of these patterns in other newly democratizing countries.