

## CONCLUSION

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **RESTORING THE ELECTORAL CONNECTION**

Regardless of the starting point, the explanation for differences in Slovak and Czech horizontal accountability during the 1990's invariably returns to differences in political parties. Other institutions, political attitudes, economic performance all contribute little to a better understanding of what put the two countries on divergent paths during 1994 and what brought about a convergence after 1998. Even the intertwining of national and accountability questions in Slovakia proves to be the product of party decisions rather than the inevitable result of social forces. Because it confounds normal expectations, the Slovak and Czech comparison offers important insights into broader questions about potential threats to horizontal accountability, and about the role of political parties in new democracies. The framework constructed in this dissertation also provides a basis for speculation about the future of politics in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

#### **Parties and the "electoral connection"**

Many current hypotheses about the persistence of horizontal accountability in democratic systems focus on the relative strengths of political institutions and the institutional frameworks that govern the relationships among institutions. A comparison of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, however, requires a different focus, since the two countries exhibited nearly identical institutional designs and the same relative weakness of institutions other than parliament and government (weaknesses that were less immediately apparent in the lower-stakes political environment of the Czech Republic but that were no

less real). The relative strength of party-dominated parliaments in both countries draws attention to the effects of parties and their voters. Although Slovakia and the Czech Republic are not unique among new democracies, few discussions of horizontal accountability incorporate parties as a potential explanation. Among the more prominent exceptions is works is Schedler, who acknowledges that "horizontal and vertical accountability are interconnected" and describes this "electoral connection" as "the most plausible answer" for the existence of horizontal accountability (Schedler, 1999b, 334). His rationale is a simple one: "rulers develop an interest in binding themselves through institutional mechanisms of accountability if voters punish them at the polls should they fail to do so. . . . Governments may discover the beauties of horizontal accountability if voters open their [governments'] eyes through the effective exercise of electoral accountability"(334). Such a connection only occurs, Schedler argues, if voters are "both able and willing, and able to signal their willingness, to 'throw the rascals out' of unaccountable office"(335). Schedler briefly acknowledges that political parties play a role in this relationship; the Slovak and Czech cases demonstrate just how critical that role is.

As this dissertation demonstrates, the key difference between horizontal accountability in Slovakia and the Czech Republic lay in the perception of leaders from a particular party--Slovakia's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)--that accountability violations would not provoke voter backlash. Although that perception ultimately proved incorrect, it was not implausible at the time and derived from two conditions described in the sections above: 1) the concentration of political resources that allowed HZDS to attract and keep voters regardless of voters' opinions on programmatic issues such as accountability, and 2) the willingness of Slovakia's voters to use accountability issues in determining their vote that created a stable electorate for HZDS and its coalition partners. In the Czech Republic, by contrast, the absence of a single dominant party and the wide dispersal of accountability attitudes across the political

spectrum forced parties to remain attentive to voters demands and preserved the vertical-horizontal accountability connection.

### **Resource concentration and the electoral connection**

For the electoral connection to hold, Schedler argues, "the incumbent party must be neither a dominant party (which is unlikely to lose an election) nor a pivotal party (which is unlikely to stay outside any possible government coalition)"(Schedler, 1999b, 334). The difference between Slovakia and the Czech Republic offers a clear confirmation of the notion that horizontal accountability persists only when those in power fear the loss of their position in upcoming elections. In the Czech Republic, coalition parties faced a such a threat on a continuing basis, particularly since none of them succeeded in offering strong clientelist or charismatic incentives. The leaders of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), on the other hand, remained confident that they alone could field a charismatic candidate, spend lavishly in elections, and engage continuing support through strong party organization. The party's confidence in its ability to insulate itself from the electoral consequences of its encroachments thus made those encroachments possible.

Just as few explorations of accountability incorporate parties, so also do few frameworks for understanding party systems explain accountability. Instead, most such frameworks show how the collapse of democracy can result from system-wide fragmentation, instability, weak roots in society, or insufficient party organization. Neither the Czech Republic nor Slovakia manifested such weaknesses and both party systems in fact reached a fairly high levels of development on all of the aforementioned indicators. The differences that produced the different levels of horizontal accountability emerged instead from a combination of less immediately obvious influences, each of which increased perceptions of invulnerability among HZDS leaders. Thus the characteristics that distinguished HZDS from all other parties in both countries appeared not as an overwhelming advantage in any particular area, but rather as series of minor

advantages in a number of realms that became dangerous only when combined with one another.

### **Dimensions of competition and the electoral connection**

The ability of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) to sever the electoral connection between vertical and horizontal accountability in Slovakia lay not only in the party's monopoly on resources but also in the importance of accountability issues for voters. According to Schedler, the electoral connection can exist only where those in power "perceive their eventual punishment at polls as a credible threat" (Schedler, 1999b, 334), but to the extent that HZDS could rely on the nearly unanimous support of those who did not concern themselves with accountability, the party did not expect its voters to engage in punishment at all. This phenomenon, however, calls into question one of Schedler's accompanying argument that the electoral connection depends on the willingness of voters to "give priority to institutional issues" when deciding how to vote (Schedler, 1999b, 334). In fact, the cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic demonstrate that the electoral connection depends both on the degree to which they consider accountability issues when they vote *and* on the share of voters who endorse accountability. While Schedler's statement may hold where support for accountability is widespread, emphasis on accountability where support for the notion is mixed--as was the case in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic--an emphasis on such issues in the electoral realm may prove counterproductive. Unless anti-accountability voters remain far short of a majority, the emergence of accountability as dimension of party competition will create the potential for oscillation of the sort experienced by Slovakia during the 1990's.

The notions of issue dimensions and oscillation on those dimensions are not new, but despite frequent efforts to study cleavages and dimensions of competition (Kitschelt et al., 1997; Lawson, Rømmle, & Karasimeonov, 1999; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), scholars have directed little attention to how dimensions shape the course of development in new

democracies. Comparison of the Slovak and Czech cases reveals a direct link between a particular dimension and violations of horizontal accountability, a link that remained hidden as long as scholars focused on competition on the more prominent socio-economic left-right dimension. In most western democracies, the basis for party evaluation has involved socio-economic questions, and parties have developed strong profiles on the left-right dimension. Differences between parties on socio-economic conflicts may become marked, even extreme, while questions about nationhood and democracy remain in the background. A change of government may usher in a significant change in socio-economic policy, but it will not, in most cases, produce a fundamental change in political organization of the state. The Czech Republic followed this pattern in the first years of its independent existence. Its parties developed clear socio-economic profiles at both the mass and elite levels and did not develop clear profiles on national or democracy questions.

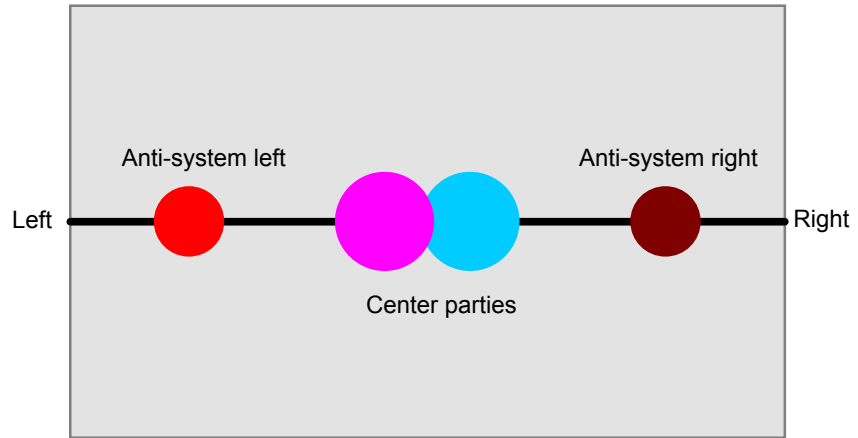
Slovakia reversed this pattern. The socio-economic positions of Slovakia's parties differed little from one another, but dramatic differences emerged on accountability issues. The competition of Slovakia's parties around questions of accountability after 1992 resulted in a self-sorting of party elites, party activists and party voters along those same lines. The shifts increased the possibility for sharp swings in political behavior analogous to the sharp swings in economic policy found elsewhere. Instead of general, if grudging, agreement among all parties about the importance of accountability, Slovakia's system split into two halves, one that expressed opposition to accountability and another that insisted on accommodation, negotiation, and observance of law. This oscillation between these extremes its dangerous potential when HZDS and its coalition partners took advantage of their self-sorted electoral base to encroach on other institutions without fear of reprisal. Unlike the socio-economic issue dimension, the competition on the accountability dimension threatened the very rules of the political game.

The configuration of issue dimensions in Slovakia--the existence of an anti-accountability dimension in Slovakia and the absence of a meaningful left-right dimension--run directly counter to long-established models of democratic decline. The case of Slovakia both suggests the need for a revise such models and the key to a meaningful revision. Sartori's 1976 discussion of competitive dimensions located the anti-system parties at both extremes of the left-right spectrum, creating the one-dimensional array, as shown in Figure 11.1a by collapsing the two dimensional array of parties shown in Figure 11.1b. The absence of a meaningful left-right spectrum in Slovakia, as in many countries in the post-Communist world, and the disappearance of Communism as an anchor for left-right spectrums in western democracies require a reassessment of Sartori's association between socio-economic and political dimensions. Without the link to left and right, the system-anti-system dimension takes on the characteristics of Figure 11.1c

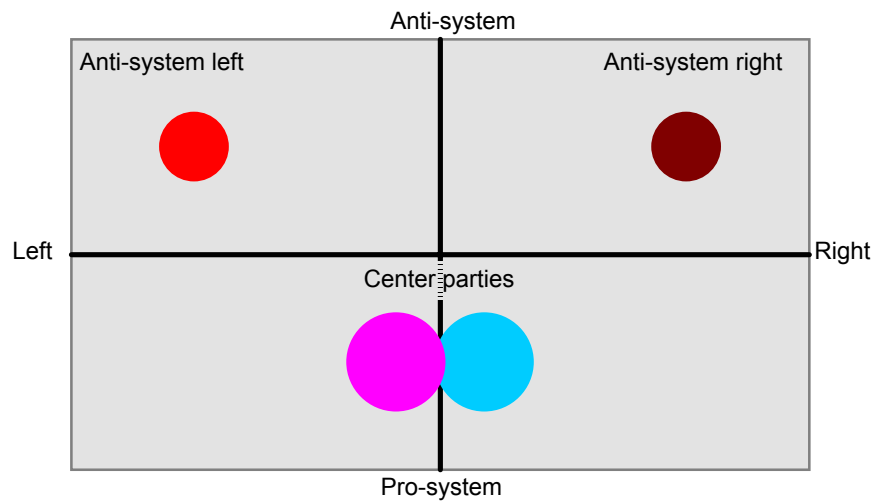
The configuration shown in Figure 11.1c does not imply that the system v. anti-system dimension--referred to here in terms of accountability--cannot coincide with other dimensions, but only that it need not do so. Furthermore, both the Slovak and Czech example suggest that the coincidence of dimensions may be only indirectly related to underlying factors and more closely tied to highly contingent decisions by particular parties and their leaders. Without the external threat of Soviet communism to align dimensions of competition, they can rotate more freely, forming new and unpredictable combinations. As the near disappearance of horizontal accountability in Slovakia demonstrates, some of the new dimensions are more dangerous than others.

**Figure 11.1. Models of spatial competition between parties**

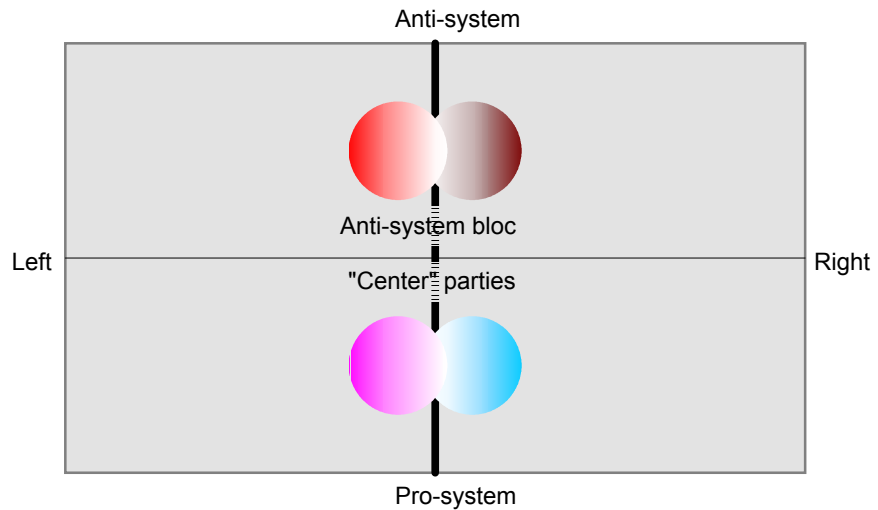
a. Sartori-model in one dimension



b. Sartori model in two dimensions



c. Post-Communist variant of the Sartori model



### **The future of the electoral connection in the Czech Republic and Slovakia**

The contingency of party resources and dimensions of competition suggests that no country--particularly no new democracy--can rely on the persistence of an electoral connection between vertical and horizontal accountability. Events in the Czech Republic during 1998 and 1999 suggested a possible shift toward the Slovak model. The Czech party system emerged from the turmoil of scandals in late 1997 and early 1998 with a similar roster of parties but with important differences in the internal organization of particular parties and party coalitions. Organizational and personnel changes resulting from financial scandals within the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) increased that party's resemblance to Slovakia's HZDS, particularly in the absence of internal rivals to ODS chair Václav Klaus's authority and in the party's increasingly strong use of national appeals and opposition to European integration. Although the party still lacked the overwhelming monopoly of advantages possessed by HZDS, its increased centralization and discipline created the potential for accountability violations in certain circumstances. As late as 1999 it appeared that those circumstances might result from the opposition agreement in which ODS agreed to support the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) in exchange for concessions in other areas. The agreement suggested at least the potential for an accountability axis, with the two major parties putting aside differences on socio-economic policy and cooperating largely for the sake of the potential political gains--especially the potential for excluding other parties and limiting the power of the presidency. The unwillingness of Czechs to fully accept such a cooperation, however, acted as a natural counterweight, however, decreasing support for ČSSD until it could no longer safely support a highly majoritarian electoral system.

Changes in Slovakia, meanwhile, involved the strength of opposing forces rather than shifts in the underlying dimensions of competition. The failure of HZDS and its partners to gain the degree of support that they expected meant the restoration of the electoral connection between vertical and horizontal accountability. The new governing

majority depended strongly on pro-accountability voters--more strongly than any Czech coalition during the 1990's--but the duration of the restored electoral connection rested solely on the cohesion of this new coalition. Having formed in opposition to HZDS and the accountability violations committed by the HZDS-led government, the new coalition repeated its 1994 experience of internal conflict on economic, religious and national questions. These difficulties were compounded by splinters within the two largest parties--the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ)--diminishing the popularity of the new coalition's member parties and increasing the chances that the oscillation would continue with gains by HZDS in parliamentary elections to be held by 2002. Yet other developments offered the potential to reduce Slovakia's dramatic political swings. The 1999 presidential election suggested that when faced with a stark choice between HZDS chair Vladimír Mečiar and Rudolf Šuster, a clear majority of Slovakia's voters opted for Šuster. Furthermore, the election of Šuster to a presidency backed by popular mandate and the new coalition's appointment of Constitutional Court justices for seven year terms ending in 2007 strengthened the position of non-parliamentary institutions. A HZDS-led majority elected in 2002 would face stronger institutional rivals than the coalition elected in 1994. Although Slovakia's accountability dimension may survive as long as Mečiar remains politically active, it may never again reach the extremes that nearly destroyed Slovakia's democracy during the mid-1990's.